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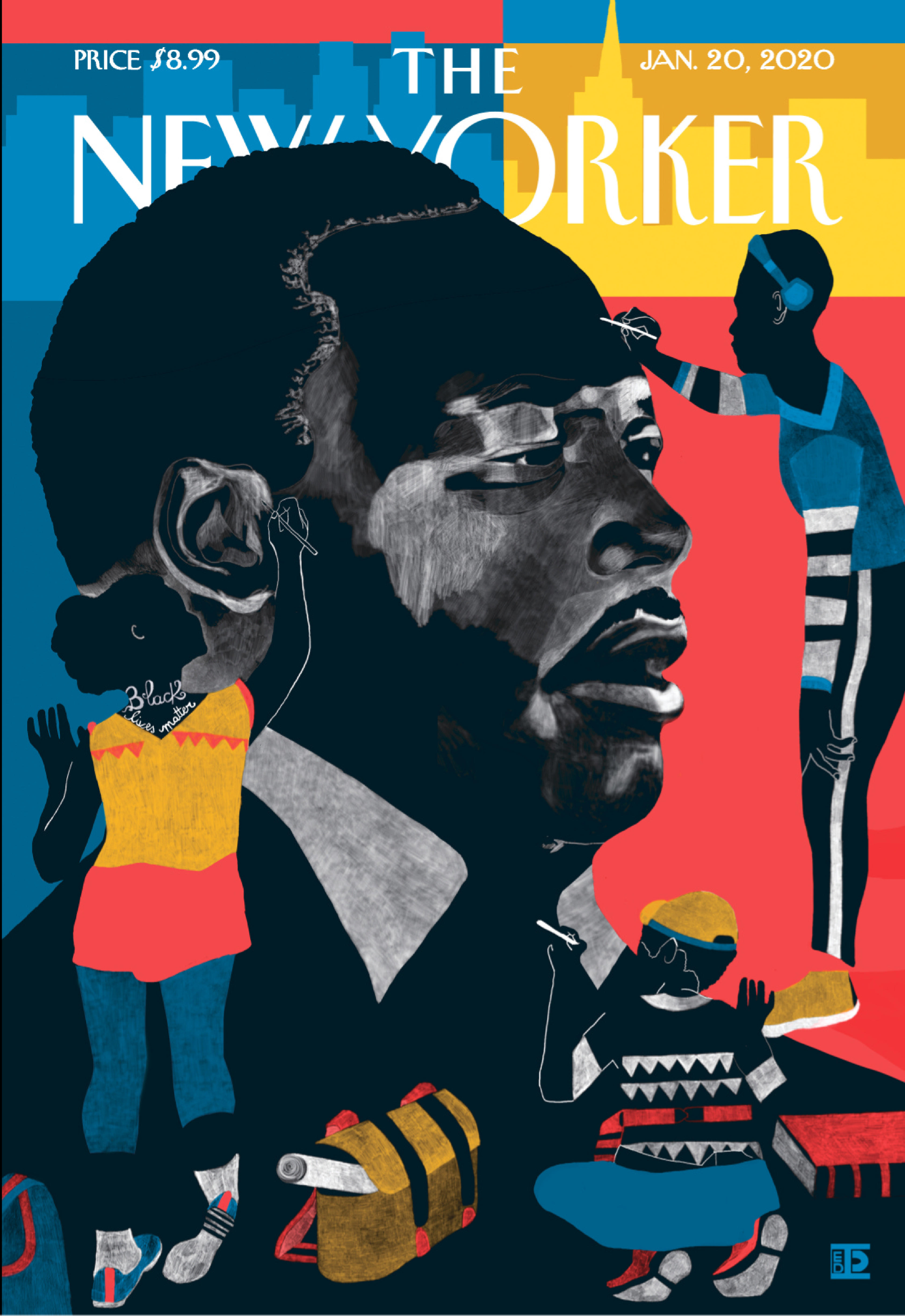

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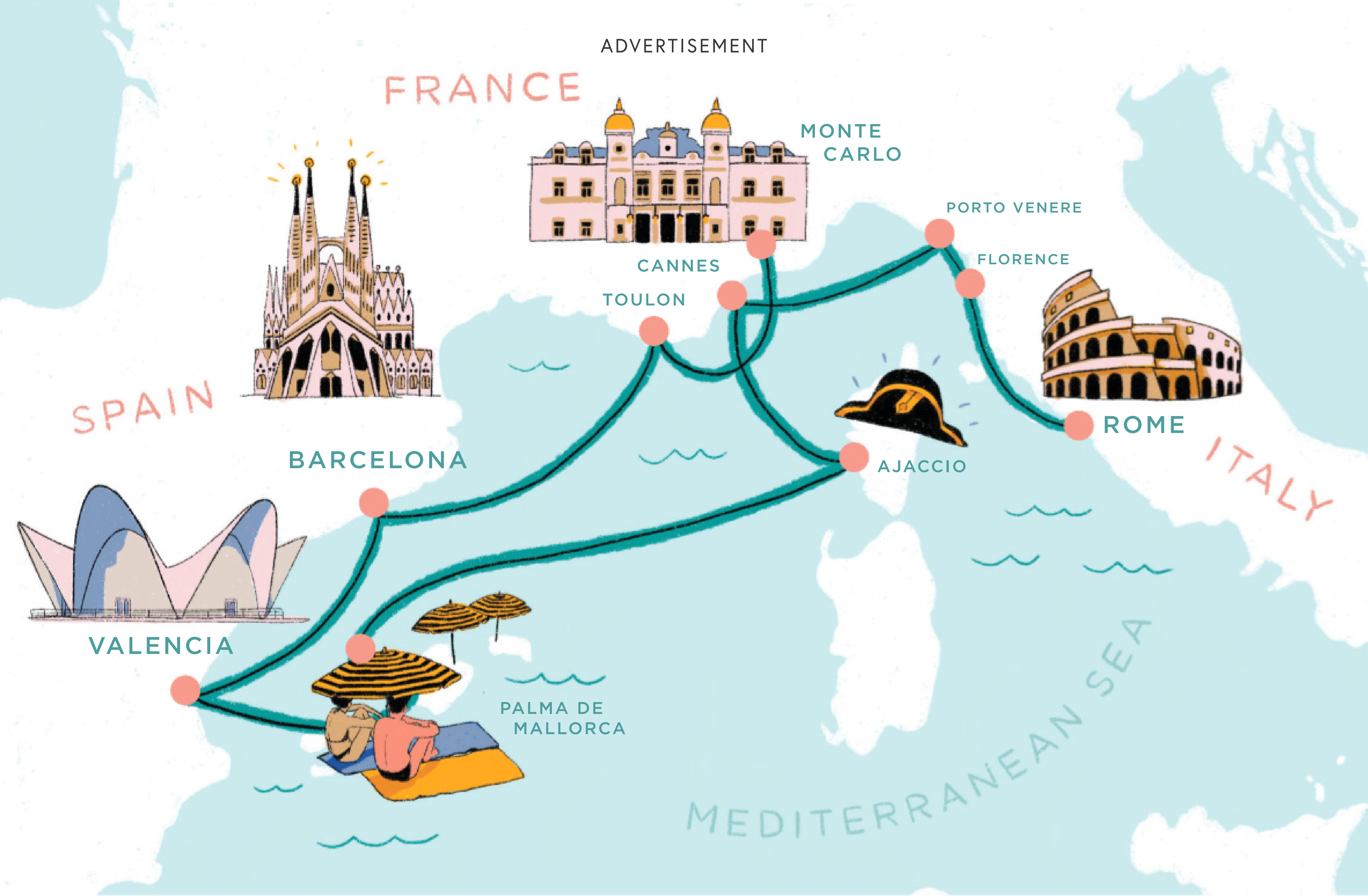

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THE NEW YORKER

JANUARY 20, 2020

6 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
15 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Robin Wright on what comes next in Iran; the other Harvey Weinstein; New Jersey tweets; “Gossip Girl” meets murder; not-odd jobs.

LETTER FROM ALABAMA
Elizabeth Flock 20 A Violent Defense
What happens when women kill their abusers?

SHOUTS & MURMURS
Jen Spyra 27 Zillow

A CRITIC AT LARGE
Kelefa Sanneh 28 Exit Music
An emo band’s reckoning.

PROFILES
David Rohde 32 Sword and Shield
The rise of William Barr.

ANNALS OF NATURE
Alex Ross 44 The Bristlecones Speak
Learning from the world’s oldest trees.

FICTION
Bryan Washington 54 “Visitor”

THE CRITICS
BOOKS
Louis Menand 62 *How affirmative action has evolved.*
67 Briefly Noted
Adam Gopnik 69 *The letters of Cole Porter.*
Dan Chiasson 74 *Robert Hass’s poems of the decade.*

POP MUSIC
Carrie Battan 76 *100 gecs, an antidote to easy listening.*

POEMS
Paul Tran 36 “Copernicus”
Campbell McGrath 50 “The Ladder”

COVER
Diana Ejaita “Portrait of History”

DRAWINGS *Bruce Eric Kaplan, P. C. Vey, Kim Warp, Harry Bliss, Jason Adam Katzenstein, Michael Maslin, Joe Dator, Liana Finck, Roz Chast, Suerynn Lee, Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt, Tom Toro, Lila Ash, Johnny DiNapoli, Maddie Dai, Brooke Bourgeois* SPOTS *Philippe Petit-Roulet*

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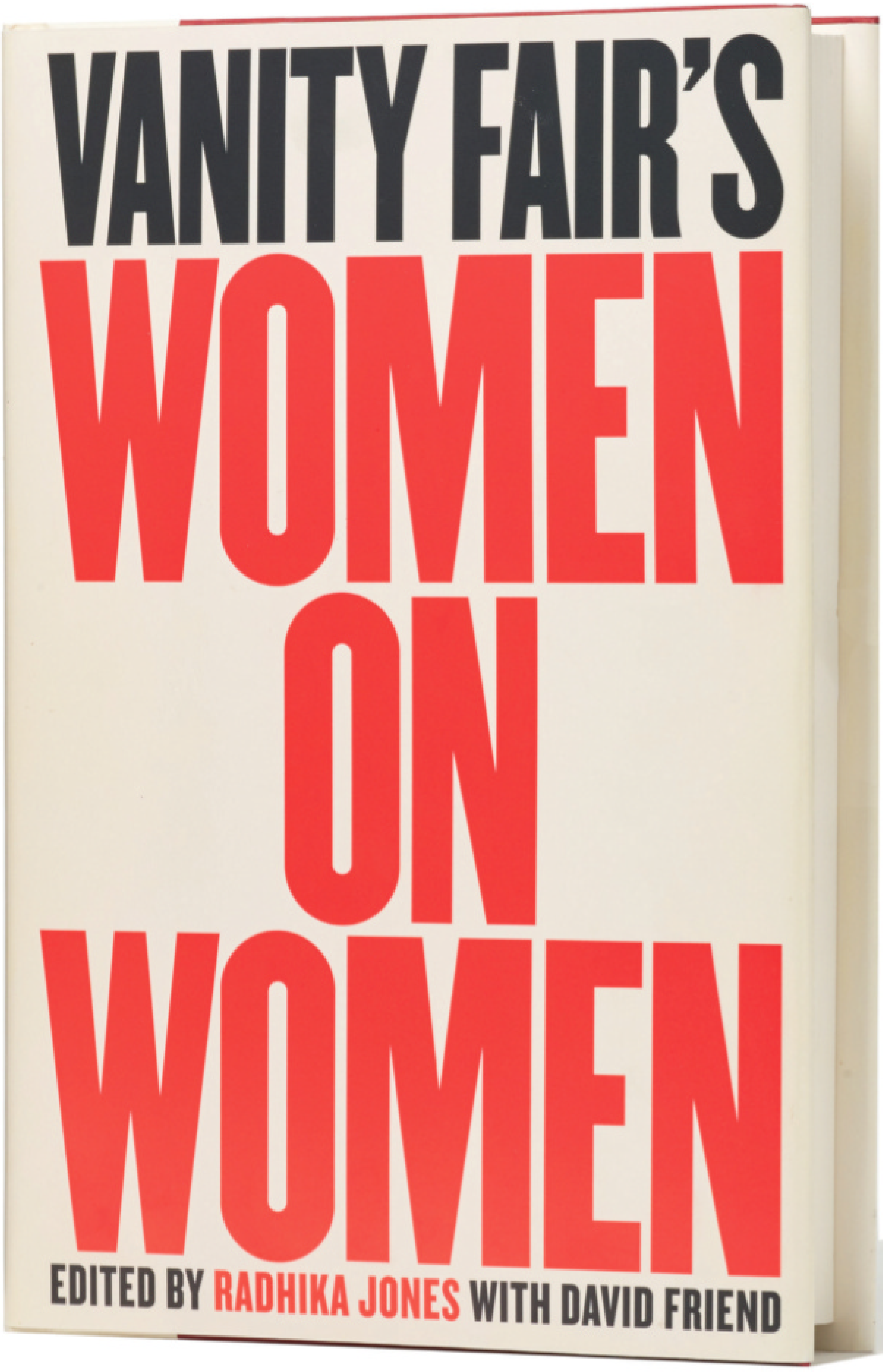
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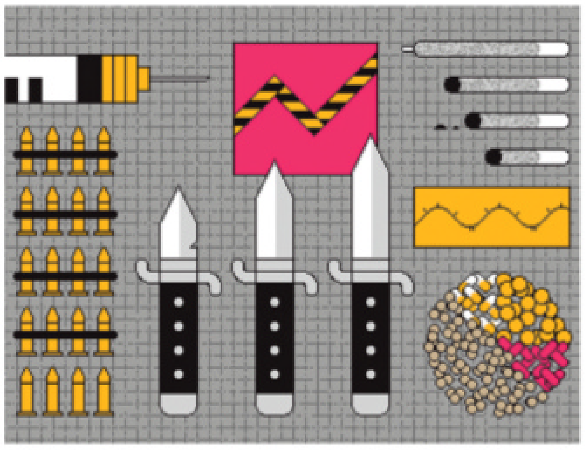
Elizabeth Barber (*The Talk of the Town, p. 18*) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

DISPATCH

Carolyn Kormann on how rising sea levels in the Marshall Islands fuelled an adoption scheme in Arkansas.



ANNALS OF INQUIRY

Measuring crime is harder than it sounds. Matthew Hutson delves into the complexities of criminology.

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LEFT: RANA YOUNG FOR THE NEW YORKER; RIGHT: NICK LITTLE

THE MAIL

NOTES ON ENDINGS

I am grateful to Peter Schjeldahl for his beautiful, brave, honest essay about confronting the end of his life (“77 Sunset Me,” December 23rd). I don’t usually cry while reading *The New Yorker*. But I have so enjoyed Schjeldahl’s encounters with art—the experience, the conversation, the writing. I don’t feel as if I am losing a friend, exactly; it’s more like losing someone I used to run into regularly, who always had thoughtful things to say and opinions to share. A childish part of me expected this critic’s voice to remain ever present. Oracles are not supposed to die. They are supposed to go on spouting wisdom eternally. I wish Mr. Schjeldahl and his family the best.
Michele Rabkin
Oakland, Calif.

Schjeldahl, reflecting on forty-six years with his wife, Brooke, writes, “I am so glad we stayed together that, for once in my verbose life, words to express it fail me.” I was so moved, reading his funny, sad, fascinating essay, that words almost fail me now. All I can say is that I wish I knew him. Actually, thanks to this affecting piece of writing, I feel as if I do. And, as a matter of fact, I consider him a friend—one I’ll miss when he moves on.
Russell Patrick
Santa Barbara, Calif.

Schjeldahl is the best art writer of our era, and one of the best critics ever. His comments on painters from Velázquez to Warhol ring as true now as they did the day they were written. His autobiographical essay shows that he also has a great deal to teach us about dying, courage, addiction, authenticity, being lost, and the possibility of finding oneself late in life. Thank you, Peter.
Theodore E. Stebbins
Curator of American Art, Emeritus
Fogg Museum, Harvard University
Cambridge, Mass.

Schjeldahl’s farewell essay is both a gut punch and a gift. It is a testament to his genius that I both laughed and cried while reading the piece. Peter—may I call him Peter? for he seems like a personal acquaintance, after all these years—has, time after time, delivered astute articles on the full spectrum of art. When the exhibitions under review have fallen outside my range of interests, he has often convinced me that the limitation is all mine—teaching openness, in other words, by beautiful example. He is an enricher of lives, of life; he is a true poet. I hope he knows how much his work and words have meant, and will continue to mean, to his readers.
Karen Smythe
Guelph, Ont.

THE NATURE OF “CATS”

Tyler Foggatt’s piece about the film adaptation of “Cats” mentions that some people criticize the musical for having no plot (The Talk of the Town, December 23rd). I was a member of the West End cast in 1989 and 1996, and I can tell you that “Cats” didn’t make sense to anyone then, either. It wasn’t supposed to. Trevor Nunn, the director, was more interested in exploring what connects human beings to felines. He asked us to improvise physically in rehearsal, approximating, as closely as possible, the “effanineffable”—that slippery concept invented by T. S. Eliot in “The Naming of Cats,” which is sung near the beginning of the show. Like Eliot, Nunn was trying to capture the inscrutability of those beloved, furniture-destroying beasts. That’s the whole story—and, with Eliot’s charming observations about British society, a fine one it is, plot or no plot.
Betsy Marrion
New York City

•

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

With female rage being reconsidered as both a political tool and a cultural trope, what better time to revisit the original angry woman? In a new adaptation of Euripides' **"Medea,"** written and directed by Simon Stone ("Yerma"), Rose Byrne plays the vengeful barbarian who takes extraordinary measures to punish her unfaithful husband, played by Byrne's real-life partner, Bobby Cannavale. The production, which originated at Internationaal Theatre Amsterdam, plays at BAM's Harvey Theatre Jan. 12-Feb. 23.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PHILIP MONTGOMERY

CLASSICAL MUSIC

SongStudio
Carnegie Hall

As part of Renée Fleming's second career as an arts adviser and advocate, the famed singer helms SongStudio, a series of master classes and talks focussed on the art of song. This year's instructors include Elīna Garanča and Fleming herself; Fleming also hosts talks with the soprano Julia Bullock and the songwriter Gabriel Kahane, whose pieces crisscross the pop-classical divide. The program's young vocalists show off what they've learned in a concert finale at Zankel Hall.—*Oussama Zahr (Jan. 14-18.)*

"Cubans in Paris"
Peter Jay Sharp Theatre

New York Festival of Song's co-founder and regular pianist Steven Blier has assembled a recital program of Cuban music for the singers of Juilliard's Marcus Institute for Vocal Arts. Divided into five sections—including popular song, zarzuela, and Parisian operetta—the program celebrates many of Cuba's most famous composers from the mid-twentieth century with an explosion of Afro-Cuban rhythms, yearning melodies, and sultry night-club numbers. Blier accompanies the singers on piano.—*O.Z. (Jan. 15 at 7:30.)*

Chamber Music Society
Kaplan Penthouse

"Kontakte," Karlheinz Stockhausen's visionary 1960 piece for piano, percussion, and electronic sounds, serves as the anchor for a program of similarly bold works by Kaija Saariaho and Thomas Meadowcroft. Michael Brown is at the piano, and David Adamcyk handles the electronics, alongside a quartet of expert percussionists.—*Steve Smith (Jan. 16 at 7:30.)*

The Furies + ~Nois
Scholes Street Studio

If your New Year's resolution involves stretching your ears to accommodate fresh sounds by innovative contemporary composers, both established and emerging, this invigorating double bill is just the ticket. The violin duo the Furies and the saxophone quartet ~Nois take on works by Eve Beglarian, Olga Neuwirth, Emma O'Halloran, Jennifer Walshe, Cassie Wieland, and others.—*S.S. (Jan. 16 at 8.)*

Hub New Music
1 Rivington Street

Hub New Music, a versatile Boston quartet led by the enterprising flutist Michael Avitabile, visits the Metropolis Ensemble's intimate downtown performance space for two appealing programs. The first offers a preview of "Terra Nova," Hub's evening-length collaboration with Oracle Hysterical, a similarly inventive collective of composers who sing and play; the second is a mix of new and recent pieces by Kati Agócs, Takuma Itoh, and Robert Honstein.—*S.S. (Jan. 17 at 6 and Jan. 18 at 7:30.)*

songSLAM Festival
DiMenna Center

There are two ways to keep classical art song alive—by performing it and by writing it. This week, as Carnegie emphasizes the importance of the tradition with its own series, Sparks & Wiry Cries holds a competition for new works with songSLAM. Audiences vote for the winning composer-performer team on the first day of this mini-festival, and the singers Stephanie Blythe and Lucy Fitz Gibbon perform world and American premières by more established names on the second.—*O.Z. (Jan. 17-18 at 7.)*

ACME
Tenri Cultural Institute

A little more than fifteen years ago, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (better known as ACME) made its début, at the Tenri Cultural Institute, with an audacious mix of landmark modern works. The group returns to Tenri this season for a celebratory three-concert series. The initial program features two works by Gavin Bryars that are encountered far too infrequently: the elegiac "The Sinking of the Titanic" and the concentrated, evocative String Quartet No. 1 ("Between the National and the Bristol").—*S.S. (Jan. 17 at 8.)*

"Elefants vs. Bears"
Areté Venue and Gallery

Two of New York's most consistently impressive young new-music ensembles, Hotel Elefant and Bearthoven, go head to head in a cleverly conceived match, with each group playing contrasting works by a pair of inventive composers—Leaha Maria Villarreal (a co-founder of Hotel Elefant) and Fjóla Evans. Also playing: On Jan. 19, Ensemble in Process. . . presents a trifecta of potent pianists—Brian Mark, Isabelle O'Connell, and Kathleen Supové.—*S.S. (Jan. 18 at 7.)*

New Jersey Symphony
New Jersey Performing Arts Center

OUT OF TOWN The late conductor Lorin Maazel created "The Ring Without Words"—a

IN CONCERT

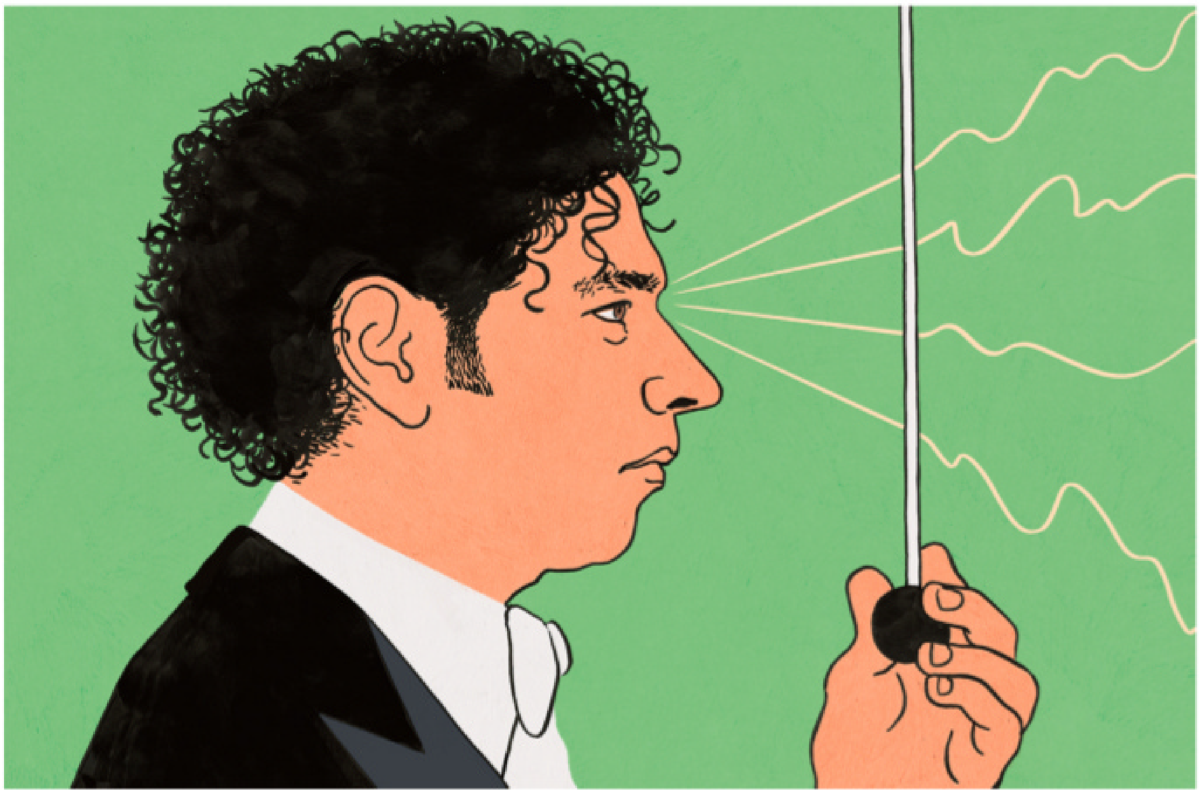


ILLUSTRATION BY CALUM HEATH

Charles Ives's "The Unanswered Question" is a spare work that contains a cosmos. The strings shiver with wisdom and sadness; a lone trumpet utters something confident and ineffable; four flutes sound a discordant note. Ives's six-minute piece sets the tone for **Gustavo Dudamel's** two-week stay with the **New York Philharmonic** at David Geffen Hall, where the celebrity conductor presents two different programs across eight concerts. Alongside the Ives, Dudamel leads Esteban Benzecry's Piano Concerto "Universos Infinitos," with the soloist Sergio Tiempo, and Dvořák's "New World" Symphony, which finds grace in a folklike melody (Jan. 15-18 and Jan. 21). The following week, Dudamel and the singers Michelle DeYoung and Simon O'Neill delve further into the mysteries of life with Mahler's pained "Das Lied von der Erde," which contemplates man's finitude in the face of the earth's eternal renewal (Jan. 23-25).—*Oussama Zahr* synthesis of orchestral highlights from Wagner's four-opera "Ring" cycle, presented in chronological sequence—in 1987, compressing seventeen hours of heady epic opera into around seventy minutes of symphonic bedazzlement. The New Jersey Symphony's music director, Xian Zhang, who served as Maazel's assistant and associate at the New York Philharmonic, polishes off the appealing showpiece in a program that also includes Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 (with the brilliant Simon Trpčeski at the keyboard) and the prelude to Act I of Wagner's opera "Lohengrin."—*S.S.* *(Jan. 19 at 3.)*

NIGHT LIFE

Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

Ches Smith
The Stone at the New School

A go-to percussionist for experimental jazz and new-music ensembles, Ches Smith gravitates toward edgy outfits (Theory of Ruin, Laugh Ash, and Good for Cows, anyone?) while displaying a musical personality as detail-oriented as it is sweepingly ornate. His stay at the Stone includes encounters with Nels Cline, Anna Webber, Craig Taborn, and Kris Davis.—*Steve Futterman (Jan. 14-18.)*

Magdalena Bay
Elsewhere

Watching Magdalena Bay's videos for "Money Lover" and "Oh Hell" is like stumbling on hyperactive, neon-lit Angelfire Web sites buried deep in the Internet. The band's cyber-art aesthetic is stuffed with manic, homemade graphics that underscore the catchiness of its bubblegum-bright pop and hooky nineties-inspired sound. It's not all nostalgia, though: blithe lyrics about contemporary anxieties ("Keep it together while the deserts freeze") are thrown in with a wink.—*Julyssa Lopez (Jan. 15.)*

MAVI
Baby's All Right

The Charlotte native MAVI—an introspective young rhymer whose raw talent is garnering widespread attention and acclaim—is equal parts rapper and philosopher. Over the looped, lo-fi productions of his album "Let the Sun Talk," he spits sharp, stream-of-consciousness lyrics that reflect the curiosity of a student and the social responsibility of a teacher. Though such cerebralism might be inaccessible in some hands, MAVI has a charismatic swagger that makes you want to lean in, rewarding repeated listens with insights that can be as profound as they are entertaining.—*Briana Younger (Jan. 15.)*

Seu Jorge with Rogê
Town Hall

For many, Seu Jorge will forever be Pelé dos Santos, the deckhand in the film "The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou" prone to crooning David Bowie classics in Portuguese. Whether singing Bowie or his own upbeat samba-funk, the Brazilian vocalist boasts a light touch, his every note mocking gravity's pull. At this Winter Jazzfest concert, Jorge is joined by Rogê, his countryman and collaborator on a forthcoming acoustic album. The Israeli clarinettist Anat Cohen opens with her bubbly Brazilian band, Choro Aventuroso.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Jan. 16.)*

Cyrus Chestnut
Smoke

The pianist Cyrus Chestnut exudes such cherubic ebullience in both his appearance and his playing that it's sobering to learn he's turning fifty-seven. His ever-joyous blend of jazz, blues, classical, and gospel influences may be best appreciated when he's in charge of a trio; at this birthday celebration, he's joined by the bassist Eric Wheeler and the drummer Chris Beck.—*S.F.* *(Jan. 16-19.)*

Larry June
S.O.B.'s

Larry June has generally maintained a head-down approach to the music industry. The California rapper, who spent his childhood years in Atlanta, has steadily released a fusillade of EPs and mixtapes while also collaborating and touring with fellow-rhymers such as Asher Roth and Cousin Stizz. But last year he really poured some gasoline on his output, firing off nearly half a dozen projects, each lengthy and loaded with beats that riff off of his intertwined Bay Area and Southern roots.—*J.L. (Jan. 17.)*

Moritz von Oswald
Nowadays

The Berlin producer Moritz von Oswald became a dance-music legend as a co-founder of the label Basic Channel, which issued ten twelve-inches in the mid-nineties that remain global d.j. staples. A steady string of collaborations—with the techno founding father Juan Atkins and the master Afrobeat drummer Tony Allen, among others—has kept his admixture of techno and dub steely and vivid. Von Oswald usually performs live, as he will on Jan. 18 at Issue Project Room, but this engagement offers a rare opportunity to see him d.j.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Jan. 17.)*

Luciano and Carl Craig
Avant Gardner

The Detroit native Carl Craig and the Swiss-born Chilean Luciano are both d.j.s and producers for whom techno is but a starting point. Each man's sets tend to be spirited and flecked with historical referents—Craig opening a 2018 Boiler Room session with twenty minutes of old-school funk, for instance, or Luciano beginning his set at the German Time Warp festival with Charlie Chaplin's climactic speech from "The Great Dictator." This back-to-back session promises to be more animated than most.—*M.M.* *(Jan. 18.)*

YACHT
Rough Trade NYC

To compose the recent LP "Chain Tripping," the conceptually minded pop trio YACHT

HIP-HOP

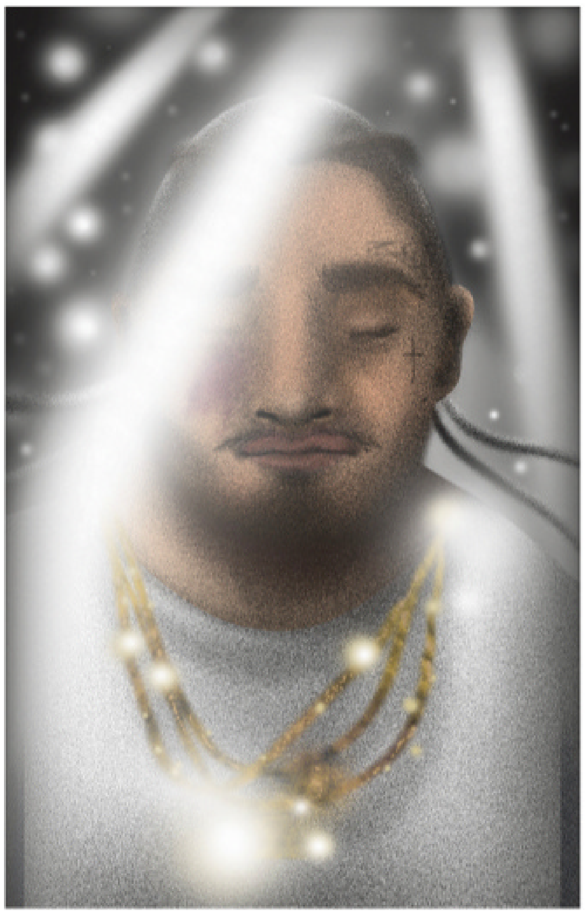


ILLUSTRATION BY DEREK ABELLA

Before the age of influencers, A$AP Yams was a visionary whose marketing savvy helped springboard the rap collective A$AP Mob to international fame and whose immeasurable impact is a blueprint for musical and cultural sustainability. Through Tumblr, Yams demonstrated a shrewd understanding of aesthetics, tastemaking, and virality before such things were the rule; his tragic death, five years ago, at the age of twenty-six, left a void where there once was infinite potential. **Yams Day,** the annual concert held around the anniversary of his passing, takes place at Barclays Center on Jan. 17, and, as in years past, the lineup remains largely unannounced. His cohorts in the Mob—among them A$AP Ferg and A$AP Rocky—reliably assemble a power-packed showcase of peers and disciples to celebrate his life and legacy.—*Briana Younger* enlisted an unlikely conspirator: artificial-intelligence software, which helped dictate the music's words and melodies using information gleaned from the group's previous records and influences. The process gives a high-tech spin to the musical games of John Cage and Brian Eno, but it also winks at YACHT's own status as a seven-album-old band by warding off the tendency to settle into a comfort zone. The robots, strangely, steer the musicians toward a funky future.—*J.R. (Jan. 18.)*

rum·gold
Mercury Lounge

The once anonymous singer rum·gold only has a handful of songs, but each builds on the promise of the one that came before to reveal an artist whose vision is robust even in its minimalism. On his most recent single, "Call It What You Want," from August, his pillowy falsetto floats over wistful guitar chords and gossamer synths, atmospheric and soulful in turns—an extension of the vulnerability displayed on his lone EP, "yaRn." Here, he opens for the rising California crooner K. Roosevelt.—*B.Y. (Jan. 21.)*

DANCE

Gregory Maqoma
Joyce Theatre

Like all requiems, "Cion: Requiem of Ravel's Boléro" is a ceremony of remembrance for the dead. The South African choreographer Gregory Maqoma places a professional mourner amid a congregation and crosses. The music is unusual, though: all *isicathamiya*-style a-cappella harmonies undergirded by beatboxing, even as the score veers into Ravel's insistent crescendo. The vigorous choreography expresses violence and cruelty along with grief, but, like the music, it tries to turn sobbing into song.—*Brian Seibert (Jan. 15-18.)*

David Neumann
Abrons Arts Center

In "Distances Smaller Than This Are Not Confirmed," David Neumann, a veteran white choreographer (responsible, most recently, for "Hadestown"), and Marcella Murray, a young black playwright, stage a conversation about race. The piece grew out of real-life talks initiated by Murray when she was a graduate student at Sarah Lawrence, where Neumann was teaching, and the resulting work reflects those personal origins. But it also folds in astrophysics, dance, and sly humor, and confronts the difficulty of such discussions by introducing more questions than answers.—*B.S. (Jan. 15-18. Through Jan. 25.)*

Shanghai Ballet
David H. Koch

China has a long history of classical ballet, bolstered by strong ties with Russia during the Soviet period. This company, based in Shanghai, has existed since the mid-sixties; its repertory is a mix of classics and newer works based on Chinese themes. Here, they perform "Swan Lake"—staged for the company by the British choreographer Derek Deane, who once served as the director of English National Ballet—which falls squarely in the former category, with polished dancing by the company's principals and an extra-large corps de ballet. The performances are accompanied by the New York City Ballet Orchestra.—*Marina Harss (Jan. 17-19.)*

AT THE BALLET

For its six-week winter season at the David H. Koch, Jan. 21-March 1, **New York City Ballet**—now under the direction of two recently retired dancers, Jonathan Stafford and Wendy Whelan—is digging into its rich past to revive some interesting and lesser-known works, including George Balanchine's "Haieff Divertimento" and "La Source." The latter, from 1968, set to charming music by the nineteenth-century composer Léo Delibes, is centered on a pas de deux that was originally performed by the French ballerina Violette Verdy, who described it as "a moment of incredibly refined French dancing—ornamented, very detailed, with a lot of subtle nuances of charm, femininity, coquetry." Jerome Robbins's "Concertino," from 1982, and Christopher Wheeldon's striking "Polyphonia," the work that put him on the map in 2001, also return. Two new pieces will be unveiled, the first, on Jan. 30, by Alexei Ratmansky, with music by the Austrian avant-garde composer Peter Ablinger, and the second, on Feb. 26, by Justin Peck, set to a score commissioned from Nico Muhly. The Ablinger score is particularly curious: "Voices and Piano" is a suite of pieces in which the piano mimics the sound of spoken language.—*Marina Harss*

ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY RUSSO

Complexions
Joyce Theatre

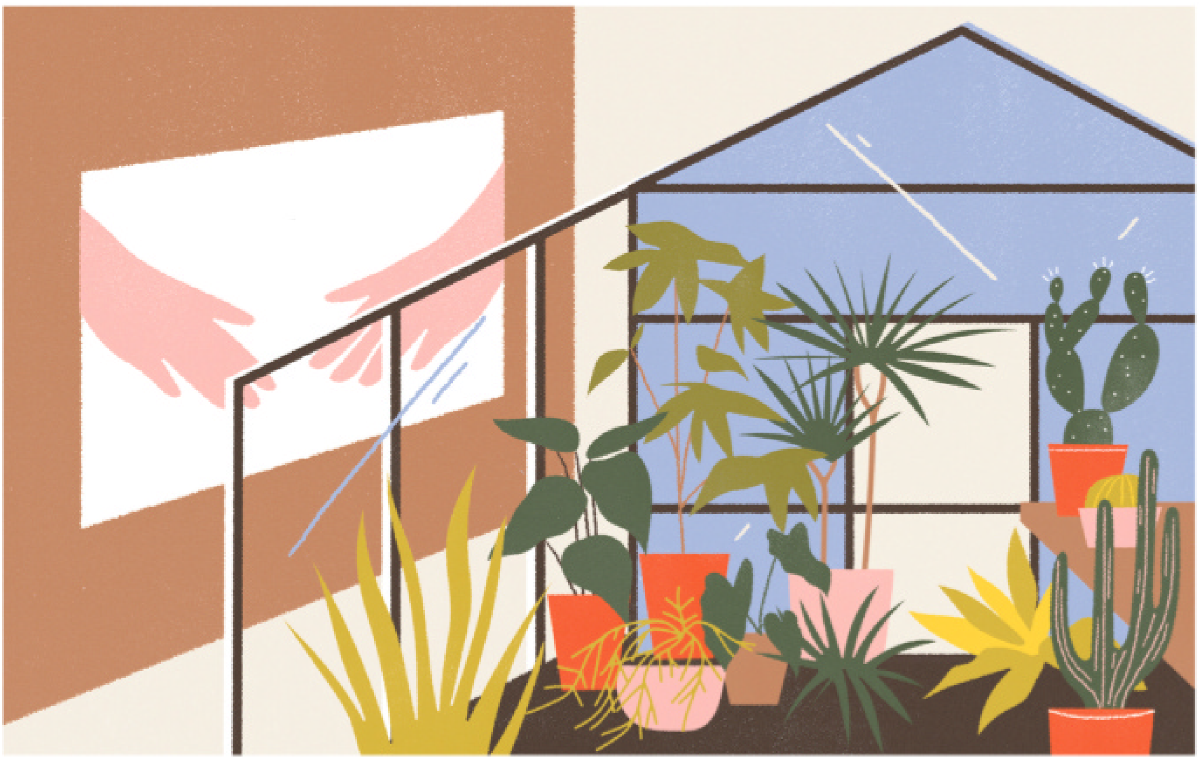
A terrific fall season at the Joyce Theatre seemed to augur a new era, free from deadweight repeat offenders, and yet here comes Complexions Contemporary Ballet for another two weeks. This season's première, in the physically flexible, aesthetically rigid, vulgarly hyperactive company style, is "Love Rocks," set to a collection of Lenny Kravitz recordings as heavy on recent let-love-rule pronouncements as old hits. "Bach 25," from 2018, and last year's "Woke" fill out the programs.—*B.S. (Jan. 21. Through Feb. 2.)*

ART

"In Pursuit of Fashion"
Metropolitan Museum

A framed sketch by the costume designer Theadora Van Runkle portrays the fashion collector Sandy Schreier with a serious face crowned by sculptural, upswept red hair. With its balance of gravitas and

AT THE GALLERIES



Horticulturalists have a mantra: right plant, right place. For the forty-two-year-old photographer and professional gardener **Conrad Ventur,** that place is Participant, where his unassuming, heartfelt exhibition "A Green New Deal" (through Feb. 9) includes a working greenhouse filled with a hodgepodge of succulents, bonsai, and carnivorous plants. Life also thrives in a projected video, which Ventur shot with camera-outfitted glasses in 2018. The nonlinear piece, edited from dozens of hours down to forty-three quietly absorbing minutes, follows him as he works at a public garden in the Bronx, prints cyanotypes of botanical specimens at home (one is on view), makes a deli run, and visits friends. Ventur is best known for his indelible portraits of the late Warhol superstar Mario Montez, but an earthier muse is the scene-stealer here: the pathbreaking lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer, who looks elated, shortly before her death, early last year, to be climbing a tree.—*Andrea K. Scott*

effervescence, it's an apt avatar to preside over this tantalizing show of Schreier's promised gifts to the museum, which range from unidentified couture treasures to a Warholian paper dress manufactured by Campbell Soup Company from 1966-67. An evening gown by Madeleine & Madeleine, made ca. 1923, is a rare example of the short-lived French house's work; the ibis-motif beadwork and embroidery, inspired by Tutankhamun's tomb, benefits rather magically from the exhibition's adjacency to the Met's Egyptian wing. Sumptuous garments by Maria Monaci Gallenga and Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo, who both worked in Italy during the early twentieth century, similarly echo the museum's holdings; they recall medieval and Renaissance styles, although their brocade effects were achieved with innovative printing techniques. (The phalanx of pieces by Fortuny here lives up to Proust's assessment of the designer's work as "faithfully antique but markedly original.") Pleasures aside, it's Schreier's discerning eye and catholic tastes, as well as her passion for preservation, that make this cross-section of her collection so impressive.—*Johanna Fateman (Through May 17.)*

Mike Kelley
Hauser & Wirth

CHELSEA In the tongue-in-cheek series "Timeless Painting," which Kelley began in the nineteen-nineties, the influential American artist took aim at the pretensions of formalism, applying the "push and pull" technique of Hans Hoffmann to such kitsch subjects as a dolled-up donkey. The curator Jenelle Porter borrows that series' title for this excellent survey of provocative paintings by Kelley, who died in 2012. Seasonally themed compositions reflect his canny use of décor and craft, and his "Cult Paintings" reflect his abiding interest in trauma and repressed memory. The concise but dramatically varied selection of works on view finds Kelley constantly testing the conceptual limits of art's oldest medium, notably as a vehicle for autobiography. His multimedia installation "Profondeurs Vertes," created, in 2006, for the Louvre, is on view for the first time in the U.S. Though ostensibly a meditation on Kelley's formative encounters with American painting, his focus on an eighteenth-century canvas by John Singleton Copley, which depicts a strange, orgiastic shark attack, suggests a sly exercise in poetic license.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 25.)*

"A Field of Meaning"
Callicoon

DOWNTOWN Six artists rely on historical subjects—and the skepticism and nostalgia that such material can summon. Crystal Z. Campbell approaches the subject of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre from an unexpected angle in a magnetic series titled "Notes from Black Wall Street," in which vintage photographs of black women relaxing outdoors are obfuscated by decorative overlays of raised painted dots. Jiří Skála's poignant images document battered industrial machines, which were purchased (and photographed) by their owners, in the early two-thousands, from a bankrupt Czech conglomerate that used to employ them. Ranee Henderson's hazy, quasi-figurative paintings are at once highlights of the show and puzzling outliers. In one crimson canvas, a body (or, possibly, two) curls into the fetal position; its title, "Papa picket picked a scab," is a tongue twister conflating labor unions and wounds. The relationship of image to history is cryptic—which might well be Henderson's point.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 26.)*

THE THEATRE

American Utopia
Hudson

David Byrne stars in this gorgeously designed, deliciously fun, and intermittently politically intense revue of old and new songs, modelled on his recent world tour. Here, the singer and songwriter is backed by a rangy, versatile, exuberant band—made up, he notes pointedly, mostly of immigrants—and dances barefoot with an unmannered silliness that casts an ironic light back on his cooler, more insouciant days fronting Talking Heads. Behind them is a huge three-sided wall of metallic-looking beads—a seventies relic made futuristic. Most important, the songs sound great. Byrne and the band cover Janelle Monáe's protest song "Hell You Talmbout," which includes a recitation of the names of victims of police violence, with a fierce sincerity, and perform old favorites with a buoyancy sometimes reminiscent of New Orleans brass ensembles. When I went, two women stood up and shyly started to dance. By night's end, everybody had followed their lead.—*Vinson Cunningham (Through Feb. 16.)*

Harry Townsend's Last Stand
City Center Stage II

Bawdy jokes and the politics of geriatric care mix easily in this sweet and searching two-hander by George Eastman. The coffeepot is in the oven, a spatula is tucked into the sofa, and, even as assisted living seems a practical solution, the eighty-four-year-old Vermonter Harry Townsend (Len Cariou) isn't going anywhere. He and his son, Alan (Craig Bierko), dance around the issue until it comes

ILLUSTRATION BY NAOMI ELLIOTT

to the surface, along with a lifetime of unresolved family drama. The play's central questions, about intergenerational responsibility and what it means to age with dignity, will be relatable to anyone lucky enough to have parents who have made it to their golden years, and to anyone lucky enough to reach their own dotage. Opportunities for tonal missteps and slips into sentimentality appear at every turn, but, happily, the director Karen Carpenter navigates the terrain with thoughtfulness, humor, and grace.—*David Kortava (Through March 15.)*

The Inheritance
Ethel Barrymore

Matthew Lopez's audacious and highly entertaining play in two parts (seven hours total, directed by Stephen Daldry) is based on E. M. Forster's 1910 masterpiece, "Howards End." Forster himself, here called Morgan (Paul Hilton), is a kind of spiritual godfather who helps tell the story of the wild, impulsive writer Toby Darling (Andrew Burnap) and his stable, openhearted boyfriend, Eric Glass (Kyle Soller), who live in a rent-controlled apartment in New York. They befriend an older couple, the real-estate magnate Henry Wilcox (John Benjamin Hickey) and Walter Poole (Hilton again), who, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, bought a house upstate where Walter cared for friends as they died. The theme of cultural transmission between the demolished older generation and the thriving younger one is everywhere in the play; the first part ends with a wonderfully moving piece of stage magic, a communion of the living and the dead. Regrettably, in the second, Lopez's fleet comic tone turns maudlin and preachy as he doles out tragedy, followed by a redemption that too neatly coddles his audience's point of view.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 12/2/19.) (Open run.)*

Sing Street
New York Theatre Workshop

In Dublin, Ireland, in 1982, the sixteen-year-old Conor (Brenock O'Connor) assembles a rock group with some classmates at Christian Brothers high school, battles bullies, and impresses Raphina (Zara Devlin). Based on the 2016 film written and directed by John Carney (who also wrote and directed the film "Once"), with a book by Enda Walsh (who wrote the book for the stage musical based on "Once") and songs by Carney and Gary Clark, this musical, directed by Rebecca Taichman, is a bit more sentimental than the movie. But the cast of fourteen (plus one gratuitous live rabbit) captures even more winningly the dumb joy of being in a teen-age band, not least because the actors play their own instruments. Bob Crowley (costumes) and J. Jared Janas (hair and makeup) build a nice gag in which the boys grow ever more peacockish with each scene.—*Rollo Romig (Through Jan. 26.)*

The Thin Place
Playwrights Horizons

The title of this new play by Lucas Hnath ("A Doll's House, Part 2") refers to a porous zone "between the real and the unreal." You might assume that Linda (Randy Danson), who is a medium, would be well acquainted with it. Yet she is surprisingly open—with the right people—about actually relying on guesswork and intuition. Most of Les Waters's production takes place with the house lights on, yet shadows lurk. An unexplained, perverse intimacy exists among Linda and her friends—lovers?—Hilda (a terrific Emily Cass McDonnell), who serves as an unreliable narrator, and Sylvia (Kelly McAndrew). When Hilda tells a story involving her mother, the mood shifts from mildly creepy to suspenseful to scary. "It's just so easy to make yourself see what you want to see," she concludes, talking perhaps of ghosts and perhaps of the theatre itself.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Jan. 26.)*

MOVIES

The Apartment

Billy Wilder's acrid comedy of corporate cronyism, from 1960, stars Jack Lemmon as C. C. (Bud) Baxter, a junior accountant who climbs the executive ladder at a big Manhattan insurance firm by lending his bachelor flat to higher-ups—all men—for their extramarital trysts. Wilder depicts the establishment as an antediluvian pack whose reign needs only a shift in climate to meet its welcome end. While sardonically depicting the routine sexual harassment of women stuck in subordinate jobs, Wilder and his co-writer, I. A. L. Diamond, also catch the headwinds of sexual revolution in the furtive freedom of the elevator operator Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine), the apple of Baxter's eye. Wilder, a bilious and mercurial wit, here becomes a wide-screen master of time, parcelling out the office hours, days, and—seemingly—years in meticulously constructed scenes; Lemmon's eager-beaver chirpiness and MacLaine's archetypal pixified sparkle put smiley faces on the grim struggles at the movie's core.—*Richard Brody (MOMA, Jan. 15, and streaming.)*

Broken Barriers

The obstacles confronted in this silent drama, from 1919, are ones of tradition and religious

OFF BROADWAY

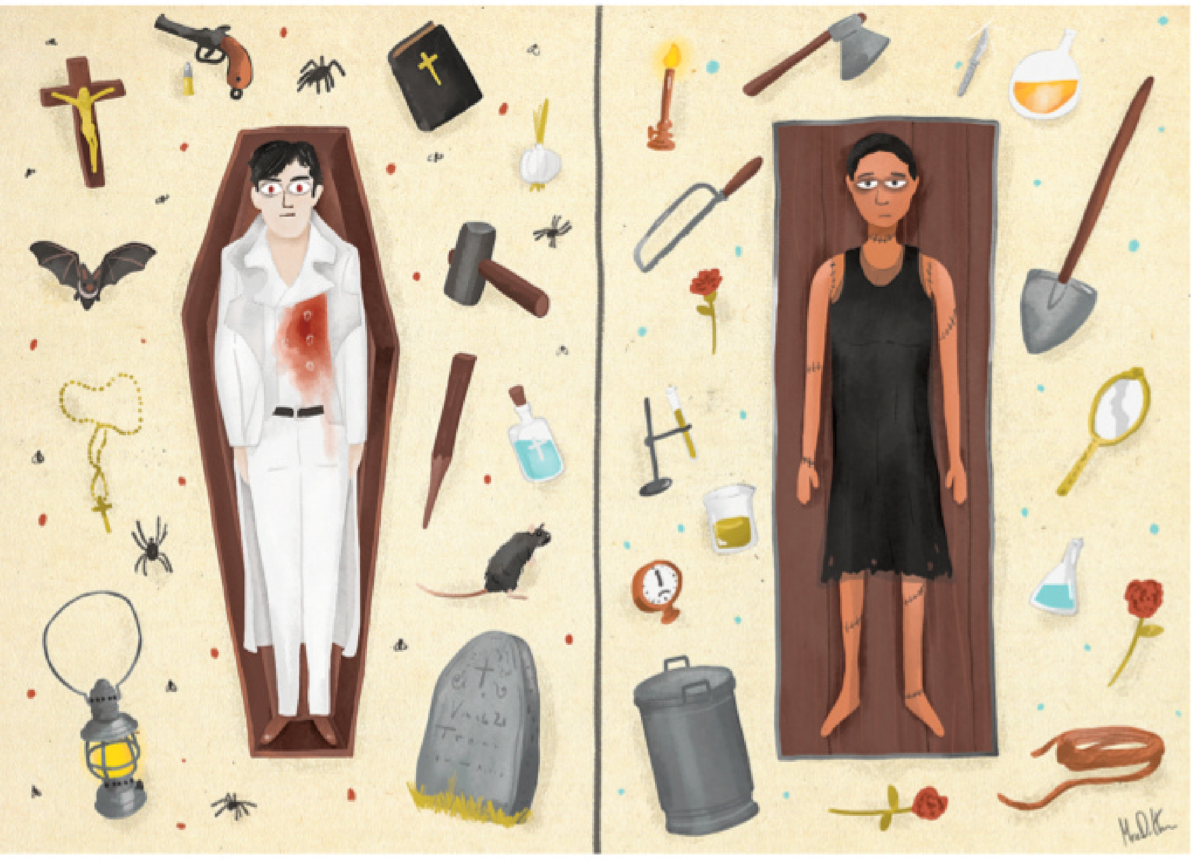


ILLUSTRATION BY MAX DALTON

Frankenstein's monster and Count Dracula can't seem to escape each other. Both were born in Gothic nineteenth-century novels, by Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker, respectively, that touched on fundamental human fears of sex, death, and the unnatural. Both characters haunted the cinema of the nineteen-thirties, in films starring Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, and have since inspired Halloween costumes, Freudian dissertations, and breakfast cereals. Now they're in repertory, at Classic Stage Company, in a kind of Off Broadway monster mash. Kate Hamill, known for her zippy stage adaptations of such classics as "Pride and Prejudice" and "Little Women," revamps **"Dracula"** through the lens of contemporary feminism; she also plays the lunatic Renfield. The London-based writer-performer Tristan Bernays adapts **"Frankenstein"** as a physical-theatre piece for two actors. Previews begin on Jan. 14.—*Michael Schulman* insularity. The movie, directed by Charles E. Davenport, is based on the same stories by Sholom Aleichem that were later adapted as "Fiddler on the Roof"; this version offers a harsh and unsentimental vision of life in a Ukrainian village. Khavah (Alice Hastings), the daughter of Tobias (Giacomo Masuroff), a Jewish dairyman and Talmudist, falls in love with Fedka (Alex Tannenholz), the intellectual son of the local constable (and an Orthodox Christian). When Tobias tries to separate them, Khavah hides with a priest and marries Fedka in haste; despite her passion, she doesn't fit in with his family and culture. Davenport's direction is plain, but his sense of place is intense; the raw survivalism in the rustic village is accompanied by the violence of its mores and the fierce rigidity of its laws. Khavah's impulsive romanticism is rooted in a visionary mysticism (evoked with haunting effects) that transcends mere custom. (The film was long considered lost; this screening is the world première of its restoration.)—*R.B. (Film at Lincoln Center, Jan. 19.)*

Clemency

This bleak film, written and directed by Chinonye Chukwu, stars Alfre Woodard as a prison warden named Bernadine Williams. At work, she is calm and composed; off duty, especially in a bar, that serenity starts to fall apart, and, at home, lying beside her husband (Wendell Pierce), she can't sleep. What vexes Bernadine, above all, are the prisoners on death row; she must oversee their executions and, at the appropriate moment, give the nod that initiates the lethal injection. Two such events are shown in the movie, near the start and at the end, and it may well be that, like the warden, you find them extremely hard to watch. Indeed, their gravity and intensity overshadow other aspects of the story: the slump of Bernadine's marriage and her close, if formal, relationship with her deputy (Richard Gunn). Aldis Hodge compels both attention and pity in the role of a condemned man.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 1/13/20.) (In limited release.)*

Les Misérables

Ladj Ly's film is a fictional tale, but its aim is to file a report from the front lines of the banlieues, the restless zones on the outer rim of Paris. Damien Bonnard plays a policeman named Ruiz, who has just joined the Street Crimes Unit in the suburb of Montfermeil. Much of the action takes place during Ruiz's first day on the job. He and his partner, Gwada (Djebril Zonga), have as much trouble with their racist superior, Chris (Alexis Manenti), as they do with local malcontents. The movie is at its best when least appears to be happening—as the cops are strolling around a market, for instance, or as a clan of kids celebrate France's triumph in the World Cup. Yet Ly is perpetually on alert; sooner or later, you can be sure, battle will commence. In French.—*A.L. (1/13/20) (In limited release.)*

Parasite

The latest film by Bong Joon-ho is a tale of two families. Park Dong-ik (Lee Sun-kyun) is smooth and serene, with a home to match. He has two children, an anxious wife, and a housekeeper. Meanwhile, in a lowlier part of town, Kim Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho) and his loved ones struggle to survive. An opportunity arises: one of the Kim children is hired as a private tutor to the Parks' privileged daughter, and before long the rest of the Kim family has, in a fine display of initiative, found employment in the Park family home. The joke, in a story shaded with dark humor, is that the rich don't know that the poor have all but taken over their lives. Not only is Bong alert to the volatile state of social injustice, he is wily enough to keep us guessing as to whether, and when, it will explode. In Korean.—*A.L. (10/21/19) (In wide release.)*

Uncut Gems

Adam Sandler's frantic and fidgety performance as Howard Ratner, a diamond-district jewelry dealer scrambling to stave off calamity, provides the emotional backbone for the brothers Josh and Benny Safdie's recklessly audacious and wildly accomplished blend of crime thriller, family melodrama, and sports drama. Howard, a compulsive gambler, is deep in debt to loan sharks, one of whom (Eric Bogosian) is menacingly insistent. Howard has left his exasperated wife (Idina Menzel) for an employee (Julia Fox) and is trying to set the whole mess aright with the sale of a smuggled stone, in which a distinguished client, the professional basketball player Kevin Garnett (playing himself), has taken an interest. The supercharged action—from a script by the Safdies and Ronald Bronstein—ingeniously intertwines real-world sporting events and real-life characters (including the Weeknd) with sharp-eyed scenes from the high-pressure gemstone business, the gambler's tightrope walk, and the habits and rituals of suburban Jewish New Yorkers. The movie's pinball-rapid combinations rise to a frenzied pitch that's exhilarating and awe-inspiring.—*R.B. (In wide release.)*

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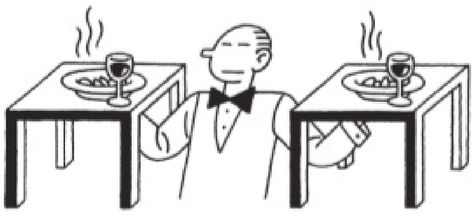
IN REVIVAL

COURTESY STRAND RELEASING USA

Rampant corruption in the Filipino police and Army provides the political framework for Lino Brocka's passionately analytical melodrama **"Macho Dancer,"** from 1988 (screening on Jan. 19 in MOMA's series "Show Me Love: International Teen Cinema"). The story is centered on Pol (Alan Paule), a young man who, having been supported in his provincial home town by his male American lover, goes to Manila in order to provide for his mother and his young siblings. There, working as a dancer in a club and prostituting himself to men on the side, he confronts police-protected gangsters who hold sex slaves and faces the temptations of the drug trade. Pol begins a romance with a fiercely practical woman named Bambi (Jaclyn Jose), a sex worker since the age of twelve; meanwhile, his erotic onstage performances with his male colleagues merge with their offstage camaraderie to yield authentic intimacy. Brocka builds scenes with incisive clarity, unfolding the intrepid maneuvers that make the difference between survival and disaster; the inevitable recourse to violence is tinged with a revolutionary defiance.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

The HiHi Room
138 Smith St., Brooklyn

The other day, outside the Lululemon on Smith Street, a woman wearing pearls spoke excitedly into her cell phone, which she was holding as though it were a walkie-talkie. "I guess Brooklyn *is* a hotter neighborhood now," she declared. Cobble Hill has been hit hard, in recent years, by an influx of chain stores and the people who chase them. The Chipotle on Court Street sends shivers down the spine.

And yet hope springs eternal at the HiHi Room, a promisingly off-kilter new restaurant from Eric Finkelstein and Matt Ross, the RISD-grad duo behind Court Street Grocers, an understatedly exceptional sandwich shop that opened in adjacent Carroll Gardens a decade ago and now has four locations and its own line of (delicious) bottled sodas. Their first full-service place broadcasts their unmistakable brand of irreverence from the front window with a neon sign greeting passersby in the same custom bubble font used on the menu: HI HI.

Inside, both food and décor are strung together by a loose motif—call it Southeastern American. The menu was developed with Walker Stern, one of two chefs at Battersby, which enjoyed a long reign as the area's best restaurant before it closed, in 2018. Carolina shrimp are poached for cocktail and seared to top grits from Geechie Boy, a renowned mill in South Carolina; those grits are also used to make hush puppies, served with honey butter. Boiled peanuts share top billing with "Carolina caviar," the euphemism of choice for pimento-cheese spread, which comes with a half sleeve of Ritz crackers.

A prep-station butcher's block in the middle of the dining room, where open bottles of natural wine are kept on ice, is fitted with a gingham skirt, and a succession of Johnny Cash and June Carter duets streamed out of the stereo one recent afternoon. (HiHi is open for lunch and dinner, and will start serving breakfast soon.) "Have a good night, y'all," a server hollered as I left one night.

I can't complain about any of this, but I will say that the theme, arch as it may be, seems like an unnecessary crutch. For the most part, the best things to eat fall outside of it, such as a salad of farro, pickled Habanada peppers, and hazelnuts, topped with thin slices of salt-baked celery root so luscious and translucent they called lardo to mind. The "Vegetable Curry!!!" is surprisingly worthy of the punctuation: a brightly colored bowl of steamed but still crisp vegetables—bok-choy shoots, romanesco, Tokyo turnip, delicata squash—awash in a creamy coconut-based curry and topped with fistfuls of bean sprouts and herbs.

The curry comes with buttery Carolina Gold rice and an array of exciting condiments, including crushed peanuts, crumbled banana chips, and makrut lime. If I were forced to choose one meal to eat every day, this would be a contender. Allowed two, I'd start with the crab Louise, a pile of cool green lettuce leaves, sweet Jonah crabmeat, Castelvetrano olives, jammy boiled egg halves, sliced Persian cucumber, and avocado, Green Goddess dressing on the side. And do I get a cocktail? The Root of All Beers, please, which mixes a licorice-and-sarsaparilla witch's brew with rye, vermouth, and honey.

I wasn't as sold on the Spaghetti Cincinnati, Stern's take on the unofficial state dish of Ohio. Painstakingly perfected versions of iconic specialties are a Court Street Grocers calling card, but this one, made with duck, hand-cut pasta, and aged Cheddar, reads more like a condescending attempt at elevation than an homage.

Still, I appreciate it as an example of Finkelstein and Ross's daring yet disciplined eclecticism, which is much harder to pull off at a restaurant than at a sandwich shop. Easier is a cheeseburger and fries, which they'd always wanted to try their hand at, but which wouldn't fit into the production line at C.S.G. The patty's heavily salted, griddled surface gets incredibly crunchy even as the meat, from the nearby butcher Dellapietras, stays juicy and loose. New York didn't need another burger, but Cobble Hill did. *(Entrées $22-$32.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

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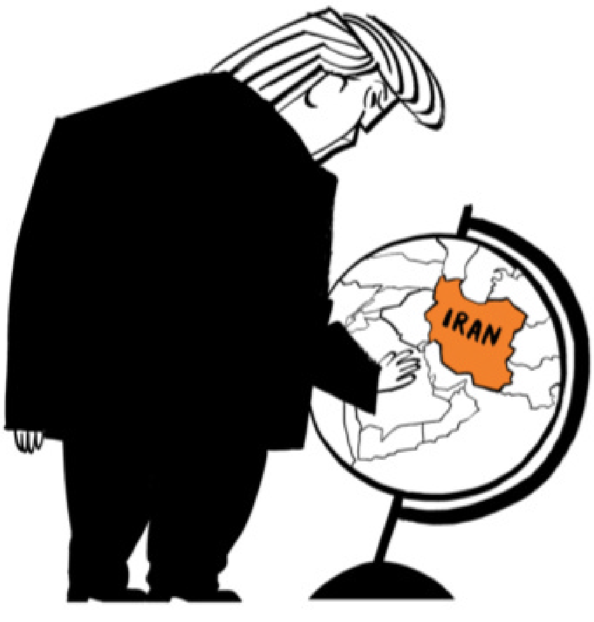
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
CONSEQUENCES

On September 19, 1983, during Lebanon's long civil war, the Reagan Administration ordered Marine peacekeepers in Beirut to open fire on Muslim militias in the mountains overlooking the city. The marines had been deployed for more than a year, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, to help hold together one of the world's most fractured states. Colonel Tim Geraghty, their commander, warned that an attack would cost the United States its neutrality and its mission; nevertheless, U.S. ships fired more than three hundred rounds of seventy-pound shells. Geraghty later wrote, "As the sun set at the end of a tumultuous day, I remarked to members of my staff that my gut instinct tells me the Corps is going to pay in blood for this decision."

On October 23rd, a suicide bomber drove a truck loaded with twelve thousand pounds of explosives into the peacekeepers' barracks. Two hundred and forty-one Americans died. The largest loss for the corps in a single incident since Iwo Jima was carried out by a Lebanese group that became Hezbollah—but it was orchestrated by Iran. Washington ordered U.S. warplanes to destroy an Iranian military post in Lebanon, but called off the strike. The marines moved to underground containers; a few months later, they sailed home, their mission abandoned. "The Iranians' goal was to remove the marines and Western influence," Geraghty recalled last week. "And they did."

The United States proved in 1983 that it had a tactical advantage, but Iran proved that it had a more wide-ranging strategy—as it has demonstrated repeatedly through the years. The next four U.S. Presidents avoided a military showdown with the Islamic Republic, even as its strategic advance across the region deepened. The risks and the potential complications were deemed too great. President Trump has said that he, too, has no desire for war, yet he started the new year with a drone strike that killed General Qassem Suleimani, the mastermind of Iran's expeditionary Quds Force, while he was on a trip to Baghdad. Trump tweeted that Suleimani "has killed or badly wounded thousands of Americans over an extended period of time, and was plotting to kill many more." Amid debate in Washington about the intelligence used to justify the strike, Trump said that Suleimani had planned to bomb four U.S. embassies, but the Administration presented little evidence to support the claim.



Trump's decision has already had sweeping consequences—for the regional military balance, the campaign against ISIS and Al Qaeda, Iran's nuclear program, and the unnerving political dysfunction in the Middle East. The Iraqi parliament, infuriated that Washington had violated the country's sovereignty, voted to expel five thousand U.S. troops. Seventeen years after the U.S. invasion, the presence of American troops is suddenly precarious; so is the fractured government of Iraq, after months of protests demanding its ouster. The U.S.-led campaign against ISIS—which still has fourteen thousand fighters in Iraq and Syria—was suspended. The Pentagon disavowed a leaked letter that outlined the "repositioning" of U.S. troops. But, on Friday, Baghdad asked Washington for a road map for withdrawal.

The Trump Administration's top two goals in Iran have also been undermined. For decades, successive Presidents have sought to prevent Tehran from developing a nuclear weapon. By 2013, the regime was within weeks of being able to build a bomb—the so-called breakout time. In 2015, the Obama Administration, along with five other major powers, brokered the Iran nuclear deal, which limits aspects of Tehran's program for up to a quarter of a century, and permanently insures international inspections. The breakout time was stretched to more than a year. But, on January 5th, two days after the killing of Suleimani, Iran said that it would no longer limit the number of centrifuges for enriching uranium. The nuclear deal, which Trump abandoned in May, 2018, on the ground that he wanted something broader, is now

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

unravelling. Iran's breakout time has begun to tick down again.

For two years, the Trump Administration has also exerted "maximum pressure," through sanctions and isolation, to force new concessions from Tehran. It boasted of its success in November, when protests against Iran's deteriorating economy and bad governance erupted across the country; the regime killed hundreds of people, and injured and jailed thousands more. But the assassination of Suleimani reignited nationalism in Iran; millions of people turned out to mourn the General's death and to rally around the theocracy. Last Tuesday, Tehran retaliated by firing more than a dozen missiles at two military bases used by U.S. forces in Iraq. No one was killed in the attack, and Washington and Tehran both signalled that they wanted to avoid escalation, but the prospects for diplomacy grew more distant. (In an unintended consequence, Iran also appears to have shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane taking off from Tehran, killing the hundred and seventy-six people on board.)

Iran's goals remain what they were in 1983. "Military action like this is not sufficient," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, said of the missile strikes. "What is important is ending the corrupting presence of America in the region." And Tehran is much more capable today. It has evolved into the world's leading practitioner of "gray zone" activities—covert and unacknowledged military operations, proxy attacks and cyberwar—Michael Eisenstadt, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said last week. "The United States has struggled to respond effectively to this asymmetric way of war."

Iran also has time and geography on its side. "We are historic interlopers. We come and we go," Robert Malley, the president of the International Crisis Group, said. "The notion that we could sustain our forces in a multifront, multiyear, unpredictable struggle in the Middle East—given the politics in this country, and the fact that most Americans don't think this is of vital interest—is illusory." On Thursday, the House of Representatives voted 224 to 194, largely along party lines, to limit the President's powers to make war on Iran. A similar resolution is expected in the Senate. Neither would be binding, but both reflect anxiety in Washington about the consequences of further hostilities.

The Islamic Republic marks its forty-first anniversary next month. Historically, Washington has been able to inflict greater pain, but Tehran has shown a greater capacity to absorb it. The United States has figured out how to react to a militia or to kill a commander, but it still hasn't figured out how, creatively or proactively, to deal with the nation of Iran.

—*Robin Wright*

DEPT. OF WORMHOLES
TWO HARVEYS

Imagine, if you will, an alternate universe in which Harvey Weinstein's picture is on the front page of the *Post* beneath a lurid headline. Sounds a lot like our universe. Except: in the alternate universe, it is Weinstein who is the victim of a shocking, horrendous crime, as opposed to being the reviled figure currently on trial in State Supreme Court in Manhattan, facing multiple counts of rape and sexual assault. Bizarre, yes? But what if we told you that this alternate universe actually existed, and that it was called . . . 1993.

That was the year Harvey Weinstein was kidnapped and held for two weeks, while his captors demanded millions of dollars in ransom. The twist: this Harvey Weinstein was an entirely different, non-disgraced Harvey Weinstein, one who never waged an Oscar campaign or allegedly masturbated into a restaurant planter. This Harvey Weinstein was the president of Lord West Formal Wear, a Queens-based tuxedo manufacturer. He made headlines not just for being kidnapped but for what he endured: twelve days in a dank, dark pit that had been dug into a hillside near the 158th Street off-ramp of the Henry Hudson Parkway. A curious coincidence: more than a few Twitter users have suggested that a pit would be a fitting home for the Hollywood Harvey Weinstein, who denies all charges of criminal activity. (Ironic historical footnote: being buried alive was a punishment traditionally handed out to unchaste women.) "MY DAYS IN HELL" read the *Post* headline after the formal-wear Harvey Weinstein was freed. A photograph showed a dashing man looking not much the worse for wear—looking, in fact, not unlike the actor Hugh Laurie.

So, two Harvey Weinsteins, one of whom may have actually met Hugh Laurie. But there's a second twist: John Esposito, one of Hollywood Harvey Weinstein's defense attorneys, represented one of the formal-wear Harvey Weinstein's kidnappers. *Whoa*, as they say.

The formal-wear Harvey Weinstein's ordeal began on August 4, 1993, when the sixty-eight-year-old "tuxedo king," as the tabloids dubbed him, was abducted from the parking lot of a Jackson Heights diner. The kidnappers dropped him in a narrow pit, shackled him into a squat, and sealed the pit with a heavy lid. (Another coincidence: Hollywood Harvey Weinstein was shackled with an electronic ankle bracelet, which he was accused of tampering with.) The ringleader was Fermin Rodriguez, a disloyal employee at Lord West, which used to advertise its wares with a slightly cringey slogan, "The Look is Lord West . . . and the lady approves." (That line would never have passed muster with Hollywood Harvey Weinstein, who, whatever else anyone says about him, was good at marketing.)

The kidnappers dropped fruit and water into the pit at intervals, and, over the final three days, Weinstein survived on a single apple. He somehow wriggled free from his bonds, but then he developed festering sores on his back. (One more coincidence: Hollywood Harvey Weinstein claims he just underwent back surgery, which has given him an excuse to enter court with a walker.)

The greatest challenge, the formal-wear Harvey Weinstein later testified, was staying sane. An experience with foxholes in Okinawa helped. (He likely felt even more abandoned than Hollywood Harvey Weinstein, who recently complained to the *Post*, "I feel like the forgotten man.") Meanwhile, the kidnappers demanded three million dollars in ransom, but failed to show up for scheduled drops. "Kidnappings were normally four or five days in duration,” the retired deputy inspector George Duke, who oversaw the investigation, said last week. “This went on and on. The family got testy. I’d get testy.”

The case broke when the abductors finally picked up their ransom. The cops arrested them and got Rodriguez to divulge Weinstein’s whereabouts. Detective Ruben Santiago, also on the case, was skeptical: “I had no faith we were going to find Harvey Weinstein where the guy was saying, because he was talking about a hole in the ground. That just made no sense to me.” The detectives nevertheless followed Rodriguez’s directions to the pit, which had been covered with rocks and branches. “We started shouting out Harvey’s name—just going through the motions, really,” Santiago said. “But we hear a slight murmur, a muffled voice. Talk about an eerie feeling. It was, like, Where is that voice coming from? It was coming from below the ground.”

They pushed away the debris and the lid, and there was Weinstein, weeping with relief. “The first question he asked was ‘Can I have a cigarette?’ ” Duke said. “He was dirty, dishevelled, but he was all there—lucid.”

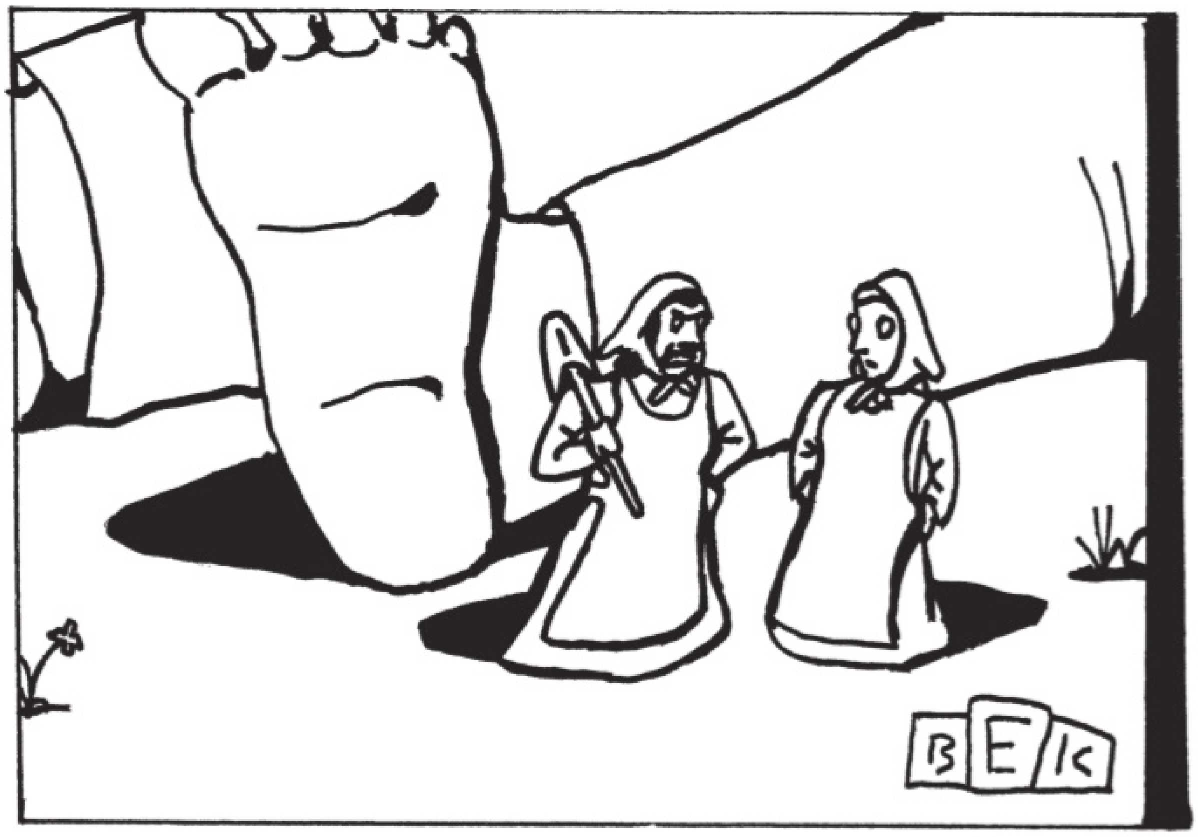
Most of the kidnappers ended up taking plea deals; one insisted on a trial and was found guilty. Esposito’s client, William Rivera, accepted a deal, and got twelve and a half to thirty years. As for Weinstein, five years later, he said that his time in the pit had led him to rethink his “type-A executive life” and sell his interest in Lord West. “I am a far happier person,” he said; he added that he never ate fruit again. He died in 2007, at eighty-two.

The year 1993 was notable for Hollywood Harvey Weinstein as well. Miramax, the company he and his brother, Bob, founded, had been flirting with bankruptcy, to the point that employees were reusing copy-machine toner and working from home when the electric bills went unpaid. But the success of “The Crying Game,” in 1992, spurred Miramax’s sale to Disney, in the spring of 1993. The Weinsteins were flush, although the three movies they had in theatres at the time of the kidnapping—“Tom and Jerry: The Movie”; “Benefit of the Doubt,” a thriller starring Amy Irving as a waitress in a topless bar and Donald Sutherland as her creepy dad; and “Especially on Sunday,” an Italian omnibus film—were floundering at the box office. The company’s fortunes would soar the next summer, with the release of “Pulp Fiction.” One more thing: 1993 is the year that the actress Annabella Sciorra, who is scheduled to testify in Hollywood Harvey Weinstein’s trial, says he raped her.

Hollywood Harvey Weinstein’s name was only dimly on law-enforcement radar at the time of the kidnapping. “Someone mentioned that there’s a set of Weinstein brothers and one of them is also Harvey, and they’re film producers or something,” Detective Santiago recalled.

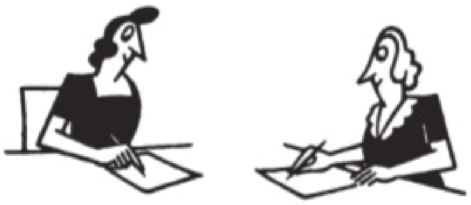
Deputy Inspector Duke, asked for his view of Hollywood Harvey Weinstein’s case, said, “I don’t know how he got away with it so long.” From that perspective, twelve days is a blip.

—*Bruce Handy*



“Of course he’d never even think about helping clean up the dead giant.”

BRAVE NEW WORLD
GARDEN STATE DADAISTS



Why does anyone have a Twitter account? Moreover, why does any *thing*—a band, a brand, a government agency—have one? The President might tweet us all into World War III, but at least he’s a person. Less immediately menacing, but equally surreal, are the occasions when the C.I.A. wishes the nation a “Happy #NationalCakeDay!,” or Chick-fil-A picks a fight with Popeyes.

“Social media, naturally, is gonna reach a younger audience,” Phil Murphy, the governor of New Jersey, said the other day, explaining why his state has a Twitter account. “And the younger people are traditionally the ones you need to work harder to win over when it comes to policy issues.” He was in his office in Trenton, wearing gubernatorial casual: gray Allbirds, a navy suit with no tie. His own account, @GovMurphy, is conventional. (“Today, New Jersey’s minimum wage rises to $11/hour.”) The official state-government account, @NJGov, is not. “big state energy,” the State of New Jersey tweeted, apropos of nothing, on December 21st. “u up,” the State of New Jersey tweeted, without punctuation, at 2:45 A.M. on Christmas Eve. “Who let New Jersey have a Twitter,” a guy named Gary wondered, on Twitter, not long ago. “your mom,” the State of New Jersey responded. That one got nearly half a million likes.

“Everyone assumes it’s some sleazy teen-age dude writing the tweets,” Pearl Gabel, New Jersey’s digital director, said.

“Nope!” Megan Coyne, a digital

assistant, said. "Just Pearl and me."

They work in adjoining cubicles, riffing out loud across a gray foam-core barrier. "I'm a millennial," Gabel, who graduated from college in 2004, said. "So what I bring to the table is more the nostalgia, that rap-battle kind of energy."

"I'm Gen Z," Coyne, the former president of the Rutgers Democrats, who graduated last May, said. "I've been on Twitter since I was thirteen."

Gabel and Coyne were sitting with Governor Murphy in his office, and were politely refraining from checking their phones. "I know they're doing something right," Murphy said. "Because I've got four kids, sixteen to twenty-two. One weekend, all my kids talked about was 'Dad, the NJGov account is killing it right now.'"

"That must have been the weekend of 'your mom,'" Gabel said.

Gabel and Coyne returned to their cubicles, in the communications department. Colleagues stopped by to kibbitz about the State of the State address, which the Governor would deliver in two weeks. "The NJGov account is, like, one per cent of what we do," Gabel said. "We write press releases, and I'm constantly shooting and editing videos." Later that day, she would drive to Lakewood to interview a nineteen-year-old mechanic's assistant for a video about apprentice programs. "Before I leave, though," she said, "let's come up with one more fire tweet."

Coyne scrolled through Twitter, looking for material. "Someone's tweeting about how Trenton doesn't deserve to be the capital of New Jersey," she said. "We could do a response to that. 'How rude.'" They let that idea drop. Gabel surveyed her desk for inspiration: a cucumber water, a half-eaten muffin. "Maybe it could just be 'muffin,'" she said.

"I guess," Coyne said. "Except, I mean, some people use that as slang for . . ."

"Oh, God, forget it," Gabel said. She opened an e-mail. "Today is the anniversary of the Battle of Princeton," she said. "Maybe that's something?" She opened Wikipedia and read aloud: "1777 . . . George Washington . . . victory for the Colonials." She looked up. "Yeah, I think we can do something with this."

They called over Derek Roseman, a speechwriter for the Governor. "You know about history," Gabel said. "Battle of Princeton. Big deal, right?"

"Oh, definitely," Roseman said. "The culmination of what Revolutionary War buffs call the Ten Crucial Days, when—"

"We won, right?" Gabel said. She started drafting a tweet: "In 1777, New Jersey won the Battle of Princeton . . ."

"Not all the troops would have been from New Jersey," Roseman said.

"Fine—'the battle was won in Jersey'?"

"Fair," Roseman said.

From Wikipedia, Gabel downloaded an image of an oil painting: George Washington on a rearing white horse. Using Adobe Photoshop, she scrawled a graffito across the picture: "Jersey Wuz Here." "It doesn't really make sense, 'cause they're in Jersey in the painting," she said.

"Whatever," Coyne said.

Gabel opened Twitter and started typing. "I'm just free-balling here," she said.

" 'Without N.J. there would be no U.S.,'" Roseman suggested.

"We need more of a flex," Gabel said.

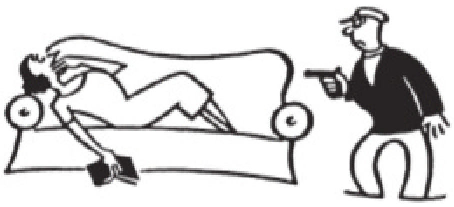
They settled on "january 3, 1777: the battle of princeton was won in new jersey and the revolution was saved / january 3, 2020: new jersey remains undefeated." Gabel attached the defaced painting. "Bombs away?" she asked.

"Go for it," Coyne said.

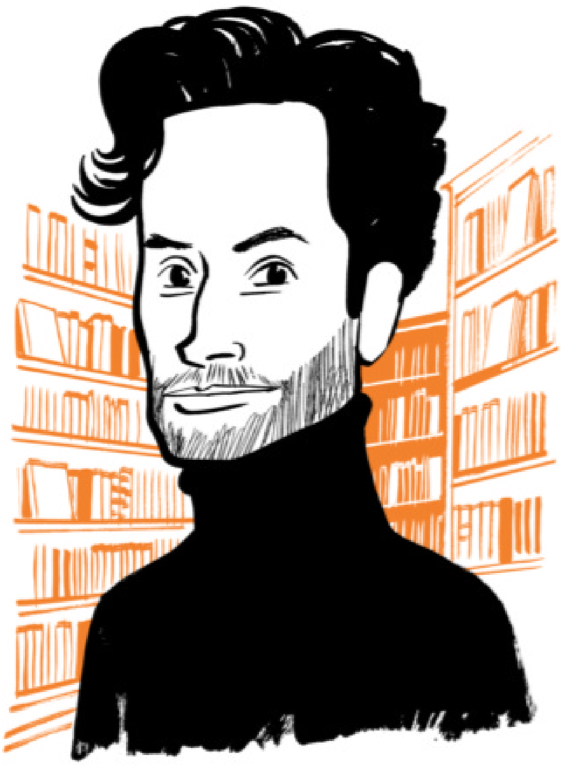
They sat in silence for a moment, watching the response online. Within the first few minutes, the tweet got several hundred likes; by the end of the weekend, it would get more than six thousand. "It's cute," Gabel said. "I'd say it's not a banger. It can't be 'your mom' every day."

—Andrew Marantz

DEPT. OF BAD BOYS
KILLER HEARTTHROB



"I drink some hot water, and then I get very low, like this," the actor Penn Badgley said the other day, over breakfast downtown, dropping his voice to a homicidal basso. "The room is dark. I close my eyes. I raise my hands. It's quite spiritual, actually." He was describing the ritual he undergoes before recording the creepy voice-over monologues delivered by his character, a bookstore clerk named Joe, on the Netflix show "You." The second season just dropped; in the first, Joe, a delusional "nice guy," becomes the perfect boyfriend of an M.F.A. student—until he murders her. Joe's monologues are addressed to "you," the victim and the viewer, and they're violently misogynistic. But because they are spoken by someone who looks and talks like Badgley, a dark-haired heartthrob famous for playing Dan Humphrey, the bookish outsider on "Gossip Girl," Joe gets away with murder. Characters on the show find him adorable, and so, to Badgley's dismay, do viewers. This prompted Badgley to tweet at fans who are infatuated with his character, "He is a murderer."



Penn Badgley

"To me, Joe is privilege embodied," Badgley, who is thirty-three, said. "He's the blindness that privilege entails." Badgley wore a black turtleneck, black pants, and beige Converse high-tops, and he spoke in Joe's melodically persuasive voice: "This is the whole strangeness of the show. In some ways, it's this bizarre kind of fantastical, bingeable thing, like 'Gossip Girl.' At the same time it's, like, Ugh! It's horrifying!" Still, Joe isn't a big departure from Dan Humphrey, he said. "It's the same role. But now he has blood dripping down his face."

In Season 2, Joe has unhappily relocated to Los Angeles. He's hiding from a disgruntled ex-girlfriend (he tried to bury her alive), and he figures that, given his antipathy for gluten-free muffins and jogging, she'd never look for him there. (Badgley, who doesn't smoke or drink, and prefers meditation to TV, likes L.A., although he lives in Williamsburg.) As Joe hides from sunshine and retribution, he pursues a new love interest. He deploys his usual methods, which range from Facebook stalking to trapping people in Plexiglas cages.

This season, however, Joe is trying to be better; he reflects on his misdeeds while reading "Crime and Punishment." But, Badgley said, "there's no way that I could understand what it would take for a person like Joe to be redeemed." While shooting Season 2, Badgley found himself listening a lot to the rapper Saba. "He's African-American, in Chicago, witnessing a lot of mental illness and death and murder in his life," Badgley said. "I started to trace back the reality of white privilege. How many white men in the days of slavery were slaveowners? Or were adjacent to the murder and torture of people because of the color of their skin?" Saba's music, he said, helped him understand "that the violence of Joe is not that far from the reality of not that long ago." He went on, "It seems to me that Joe is an allegory for the history of our country, maybe."

Badgley belongs to the Baha'i faith, which, he explained, teaches non-engagement in partisan politics, but encourages its members to be "engaged in thinking about and attempting to meet the needs of the age you live in." On Twitter, he likes to alert fans to global injustice. "Right now, I'm considering how to post about my visit to a detention facility, in New Mexico," he said. " 'Facility.' It seems silly to call it that. It's operated like a prison. And the people there are not criminals."

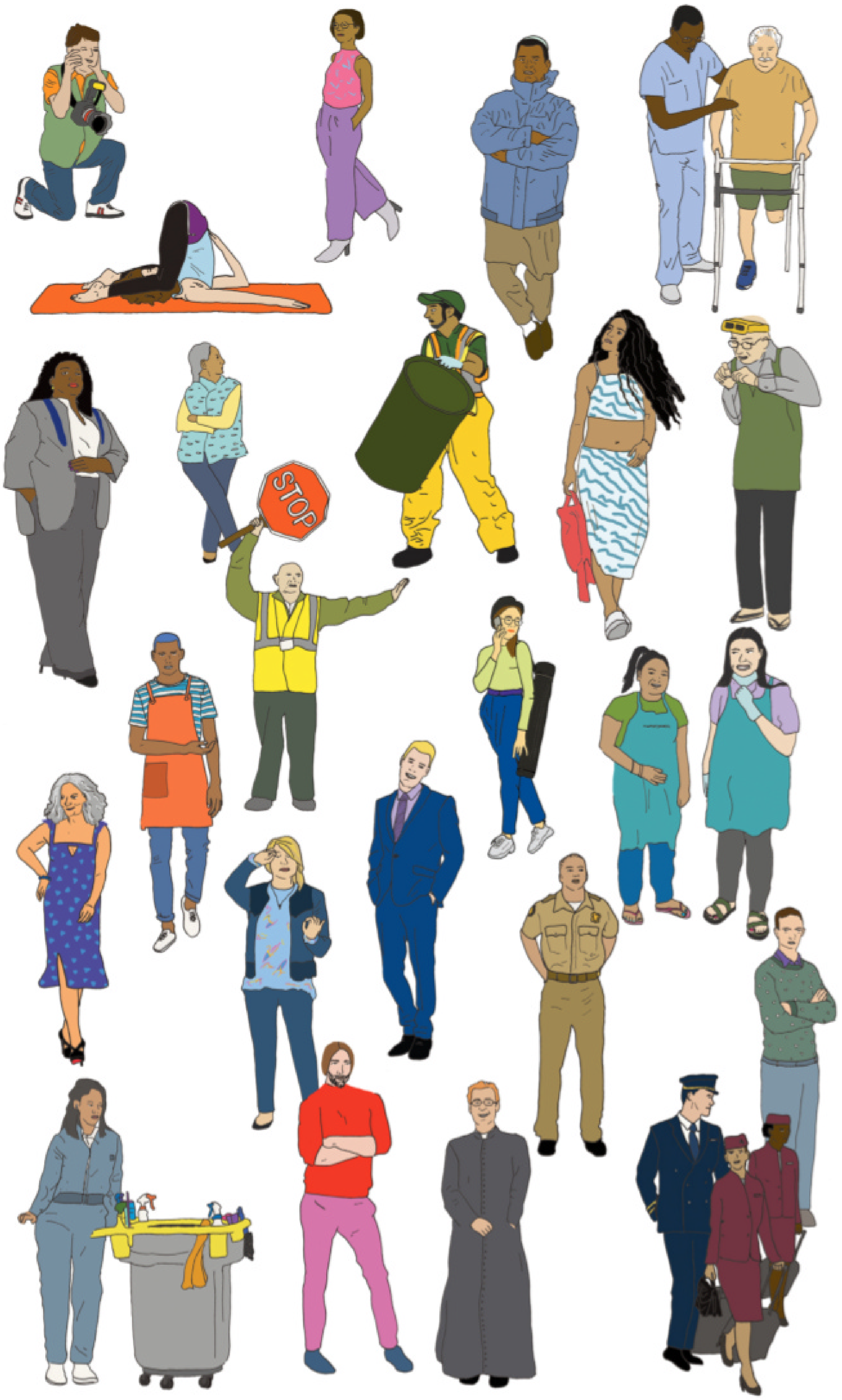
After breakfast, he walked to McNally Jackson Books and browsed the shelves. On "You," Joe scorns his customers for buying Dan Brown novels and chakra guides. Unlike Joe, Badgley hasn't read Dostoyevsky. "The idea that philosophers in the past have actually figured anything out when we've ended up where we've ended up . . . ," he said. "You're kind of, like, 'I dunno. I'm not sure, old white guy! I'm not sure I'm interested in what you have to say!' "

—*Elizabeth Barber*

SKETCHPAD BY MONA CHALABI

THE JOBS OF NEW YORK

If it seems like everyone you pass on the sidewalk is either a psychiatrist or an artist, you might be in New York City. An analysis of nationwide labor surveys turned up twenty-four occupations that are way more common here than they are in the rest of the country.



Row 1 (from top): *photographers: 1.4 times more common in N.Y.C.; fitness trainers: 1.4x; writers: 2.5x; taxi-drivers and chauffeurs: 1.3x; home health aides: 3.9x.* **Row 2:** *lawyers: 1.9x; laundry and dry-cleaning workers: 1.3x; refuse collectors: 1.3x; fine artists: 1.8x; jewellers: 2.8x.* **Row 3:** *bussers: 1.3x; crossing guards: 2.6x; architects: 1.7x; manicurists: 3.7x.* **Row 4:** *fashion designers: 5.9x; psychiatrists: 2.3x; financial analysts: 2.8x; bailiffs: 2.3x; art directors: 3.3x.* **Row 5:** *janitors and cleaners: 1.3x; hairdressers and cosmetologists: 1.2x; clergy: 1.6x; airline pilots and flight engineers: 1.7x; flight attendants: 2.0x.*

LETTER FROM ALABAMA

A VIOLENT DEFENSE

How far can abused women go to protect themselves?

BY ELIZABETH FLOCK

Brittany Smith faces life in prison for killing the man who raped her.

Snow was falling in Stevenson, Alabama, when Brittany Smith and her brother, Chris McCallie, stopped at a McDonald's. It was January, 2018, and Brittany felt happier than she had in a long time. After years of working low-paying, menial jobs, she was coming from an interview at a flooring company. She'd been hired on the spot, at a wage that would more than cover her expenses, including rent for her four-bedroom red brick house. Brittany, who is now thirty-two, has four children. In 2013, after she struggled with substance abuse, the state removed the eldest three, who eventually went to live with her uncle. But a long period of good behavior meant that she'd soon get increased visitations, and then, she hoped, full custody. "I was just uplifted," she told me recently. "Like, everything is going right. I have a job now, I'm going to get my babies back, and I have a home."

On the drive back to her house, Brittany got a call from Todd Smith, an old acquaintance who bred pit bulls in Jasper, Tennessee, just over the state line. She had visited his house the day before, and taken home a reddish-colored puppy with gray-blue eyes, like her own. She named her Athena.

Now Todd, who was thirty-eight, asked if she would pick him up from a city park. He said that he was stranded and freezing, and he had no one else to call. He didn't tell her that his father had kicked him out of the house after a violent altercation that ended with Todd's arrest. Picking Todd up didn't seem like a good idea—according to Brittany, he had expressed romantic interest in her, which she'd rejected—and Chris advised her not to. "I just had a gut feeling that something was going to happen," he said.

Still, the snow was coming down thick and fast. Brittany told Todd that they'd pick him up, and that he could stay on the couch for the night; she didn't want him in the children's beds.

After Chris dropped Brittany and Todd off at her house, they gave the puppy a bath and talked about the meth crisis that had engulfed the Tennessee Valley and derailed their lives. Brittany had become hooked after losing her grandmother and a baby—to a rare congenital condition—within a year. She'd grown alarmingly skinny, had been arrested for drug possession, and spent two weeks in jail. But now she was clean. Todd, who had buzzed hair, flushed cheeks, and a disarming smile, said that he still struggled with drugs. Brittany urged him to get "his priorities together," telling him about the good job she'd just been offered and how her kids might soon come home.

According to her, as she spoke, Todd's face hardened, and he asked if she thought she was better than him. He then called her a bitch and head-butted her. Terrified, she ran into her bedroom and shut the door, but Todd broke through it. He threw her on the bed and choked her until she passed out. When she woke up, she was naked and had urinated on herself. He was raping her, and his hands were tight around her throat. "We're friends," she tried to say, but her voice sounded squeaky through his grip, like a cartoon character's. "We're friends," he replied, mocking her. "Don't say a fucking word or I'll kill you."

As he raped her, Brittany fought back, sobbing and clawing at him so hard that some of her fingernails ripped off. He twisted her head against the side of the bed until she thought her neck would break. They fell onto the floor, and again he choked her until she blacked out. "Then I woke back up, and let him finish what he was doing," Brittany told me. "And his whole face changed, he was normal."

Afterward, Todd said that if she told anyone what had happened he would kill her and everyone she loved—her mother, her brother, and her children. He wanted cigarettes, and Brittany offered to call someone to take them to the store, since she didn't have a car.

She called her mother, Ramona McCallie, who lived nearby. Todd held the phone while Brittany talked, and she tried to subtly convey that something was wrong. Ramona thought that her daughter sounded strange, as if she'd

THIS PIECE WAS SUPPORTED BY THE PULITZER CENTER.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NYDIA BLAS

been crying. But Ramona was exhausted from a new job cleaning houses, and she sent Chris over.

At a local gas station, Brittany went in for cigarettes while Chris and Todd sat in the car. In the fluorescent light, the cashier, Paige Painter, who regularly served Brittany, noticed her tangled hair, ripped nails, and scratched face. "What happened to you?" Painter asked.

In a low voice, Brittany asked for a piece of paper, wrote down "Todd Smith," and said that he'd beaten and raped her. She added that, if she was dead in the morning, he was the person who had done it. But she made Painter promise not to call the police. "If the police were involved, I would be dead right now," Brittany said to me. "He told me that, and after what he put me through I believed him."

When Chris again dropped off Brittany and Todd, Brittany told him to go see Painter. At the gas station, Chris said, he went "blank." Then he drove back to Brittany's house with a registered .22-calibre revolver that he kept in his car. Meanwhile, Brittany had texted her mother. "Mom Todd has tried to kill me literally," she wrote. "Don't act like anything is wrong . . . He will kill me if he knows."

Chris said that he found Todd in the kitchen. "You need to get your shit and leave," Chris told him, and accidentally fired a shot into a cabinet. When Todd refused to go, Chris set the gun down on the kitchen island and tried to wrestle him out of the house. Chris was large but soft; Todd was barrel-chested, and he had taken a combination of Xanax, amphetamines, alcohol, and meth. According to Chris, Todd easily got him in a headlock and began choking him.

Brittany, who had been in the living room until hearing the shot, said she picked up the gun from the counter. Sobbing and screaming, she told Todd to let her brother go. When he kept choking Chris, saying that he'd kill them both, Brittany fired a shot. When Todd still didn't let go, she fired two more rounds. After he fell, she called 911.

"Someone just got shot at 211 Sharon Drive," Brittany told the operator. "He—he tried to kill me and—" As the operator went through a series of questions, Brittany grew frantic. "Just have an ambulance come, please, because I don't want this man to die." The operator told her how to do CPR, and Brittany performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Todd while Chris did chest compressions.

Police officers showed up nearly half an hour later, around the time that Todd died. Brittany detailed how he had beaten and raped her and attacked Chris. A rape kit showed bruises on her neck, breasts, arms, legs, and pelvis, evidence of strangulation, bite marks on her neck and chin, and secretions on her neck and in her vagina. Yet within forty-eight hours she had been charged with murder.

Initially, Chris and Brittany told the police that he had killed Todd. Both of them believed that a woman who had defended herself against violence would never get a fair trial in Jackson County, where Stevenson is situated. "I hate to say this, but, Jackson County, they're a little bit behind on the times," Chris told me, arguing that, if law enforcement had known that it was Brittany who fired the gun, they would not have taken her for a rape-kit examination until it was too late. Women, he said, "get the short end of the stick."

Stevenson, once a lively railroad hub, is now riddled with vacant storefronts and empty lots. A quarter of the town's residents live below the poverty line, and well-paying jobs are scarce. The town's biggest annual event celebrates the now defunct train station and features lawnmower races and vintage cars.

Between 2015 and 2017, Jackson County had more than double the state average of aggravated assaults per capita. There were far fewer simple assaults, but the sheriff's office told me that officials categorize some domestic-violence complaints—after, say, a woman has been slapped—as "harassment," a lesser crime.

Nearly every woman I met in the county had a story of domestic violence. Often, drugs played a role. One woman, a single mother and a neighbor of the McCallies, told me that her husband of fourteen years, while on meth, had "stomped my head in until I passed out." Another woman told me that she'd been sexually assaulted as a child, and that her ex-husband had held her hostage at gunpoint. On both occasions, she said, authorities made her feel as if she were to blame. "Instead of being treated like the victim, it was more like my fault," she said. "They said if I did anything to him, I would have been the one going to jail. . . . What am I supposed to do, let him beat me and end up dead?"

When I told the Jackson County sheriff, Chuck Phillips, about these conversations, he insisted that domestic violence and sexual abuse weren't especially common in the county. "I don't know who you talked to, but I don't much believe that," he said. "I mean, our statistics are not outrageous." He told me, "People get high, they get stupid."

Some of the women said that they had not reported the violence because they did not have confidence in law enforcement. Sandra Goodman, a local rape-victim advocate who took on Brittany's case, told me that, when a woman makes a report, the police often "don't acknowledge it." In her role as an advocate, Goodman provides transportation and attends court hearings for women who have been sexually assaulted. She is also the vice-president of Healing Bridge, a nonprofit in LaFayette, Georgia, which offers free counselling to victims of sexual abuse. Goodman said that the center often takes clients from Jackson County, because resources there are few. She described the violence in the county as an epidemic. "A lot of the time, they take the woman's statement and that's where it stops," she said, referring to the local police.

The sheriff's office's handling of the recent deaths of two women has not inspired much confidence. In 2017, a year after a woman's body was found on the railroad tracks, law enforcement said that her death remained unsolved because of a long delay in receiving the forensic report. (When I followed up, the sheriff's office cited a lack of evidence.) In October, 2018, when another woman was found dead, police initially announced that she'd been stabbed; later, they said that she had been hit by a car. "The women getting killed or almost getting killed is going up because they aren't doing anything about it," one woman told me. "They don't want to waste their time."

Throughout the two-thousands,

Alabama was among the states where a woman was most likely to be murdered by a man, according to F.B.I. data analyzed by the Violence Policy Center, a gun-crime-prevention group. In 2011, Alabama stopped submitting its homicide data to the Bureau, but Georgia and Tennessee, its neighbors, are still in the top ten.

Brittany believed that, if she had not shot Todd, he would have killed her and Chris. "I did what I thought I had to do, what I did have to do, no doubt in my mind," she said.

In March, 2018, a grand jury indicted Brittany for murder. She said that she was given legal advice that the prosecution planned to argue that she and Todd had been in a relationship, a claim that she denies. Her bond was set at a hundred thousand dollars, which her mother, who lived in Stevenson's public housing, could not pay. If convicted, Brittany faced a sentence of twenty years to life.

That month, an investigator for the sheriff's office testified at a pretrial hearing that he didn't believe Todd had tried to kill Brittany. When asked about her injuries—the rape kit had counted thirty-three—he said, "Honestly, I mean, I would have thought there would be more."

In the past several decades, imprisonment of women in the United States has increased at a rate twice that of men; there are now some two hundred and thirty thousand women incarcerated. No national data exist on how many women imprisoned for violent crimes claim that they were acting in self-defense, but a 2004 study by the Department of Justice, which surveyed sixty female inmates at a maximum-security prison in the Southeast, found that nearly half of them said that they had acted in self-defense or retaliated in the wake of abuse. "The women acted in response to being pushed, slapped, punched, beaten, choked, raped, or threatened with a weapon," the study's author wrote.

A review by researchers at the University of South Carolina and at Yale, in 2008, which drew on dozens of previous studies, found that when women used violence against male partners it generally occurred after violence was done to them. The review noted that women were more likely to be motivated by self-defense and by fear, while men's use of violence was more often motivated by control. "I've been beaten in my head with hammers, I had my ear drum busted, I had my nose busted, I been hit in the ribs with a bat," one woman told researchers. "When I started fighting back he know what happens now, [they] got these laws where you both fight you go to jail. So I got a jail record for assault. . . . God, what is the justice in this?"

Courts frequently do not take evidence of abuse into account. Sometimes this is because a woman's lawyer fails to hire an expert witness to testify about the effects of sexual or domestic violence. A prosecutor may successfully argue that a woman's self-defense claim is invalid because she didn't end a relationship with an abuser, didn't call the police about the violence (as Brittany didn't), or allowed the abuser into her home (as Brittany did). Or a judge may not permit the evidence of abuse to be presented.

In 2014, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Tracey Grissom was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for murder, for shooting her ex-husband, Hunter. The judge did not allow jurors to hear that, in 2010, Hunter had been charged with rape and sodomy after allegedly assaulting Grissom. Grissom said that he had knocked her to the ground, choked her with a drumstick, and sexually abused her until she lost consciousness. She said the attack caused rectal-nerve damage and required surgery, and that she now used a colostomy bag. The day of the shooting, she said, she'd feared for her life, but eyewitnesses said that she had begun shooting without provocation. "I didn't do anything wrong," Grissom said, sobbing, after her conviction. "All I did was protect myself." One of the jurors later said that, if she'd been able to hear the details of the abuse, she would have voted to acquit.

Britnea Myers was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to twenty years in 2013, after stabbing her husband, Timothy, outside Mobile. She said that Timothy had been abusive since returning from Iraq, where he had served as a member of the Alabama National Guard. According to Myers, Timothy attempted to strangle her to death while she was holding their son. After receiving her sentence, she told a local TV station, "I guess in the state of Alabama it's illegal to defend yourself." Myers later filed a petition for post-conviction relief, arguing that her counsel had been ineffective in failing to let her testify, and that the prosecution had neglected to hand over photographs of the injuries she had sustained before the stabbing, including wounds to her chest, throat, ankle, and head. Her petition was denied.

News coverage of these cases largely focusses on the archetypes that the prosecution draws of the women—"cold-blooded murderer," "evil," and "heartless" are common descriptions. The Alabama media, in reporting on Todd's death, did not mention Brittany's rape. Researchers at nonprofits whom I spoke to were frustrated by a lack of statistics on how many women have been incarcerated for defending themselves. In some cases, it was almost as if the violence against women didn't exist.

An analysis of F.B.I. homicide data performed, at my request, by John Roman, a senior fellow at N.O.R.C. at the University of Chicago, illuminates the differences in outcomes for women and men who claim self-defense. Roman examined the number of justifiable homicides—a killing deemed to have been carried out without malicious or criminal intent—between 1976 and 2018, and found that the likelihood of this ruling in cases in which men killed other men was ten per cent greater than when women killed men. (Cases in which men kill women or women kill women are almost never found to be justified.) In Alabama, the gender disparity was even greater. Before the state stopped reporting such data to the F.B.I., women lost their cases twenty-five per cent more often than men did.

Joshua Todd Smith grew up in Jasper, Tennessee, the seat of Marion County. His parents divorced when he was young. According to Jeff Poe, a cousin of Todd's, the two boys loved to explore the surrounding woods and mountains of the Tennessee Valley. "Man, we had a good time when we was kids," Poe said. "Then we grew up and started experimenting."

In high school, Poe said, they just drank. But later Todd started taking opioids, benzodiazepines, and meth, among other drugs. It was common for men in the valley to settle their differences by fighting, but "Todd would take it to the next level," Poe said. He almost never lost a fight, and if he did he went back for more.

Poe said that, as they got older, he began to worry that Todd didn't like to be sober; when he was on something, his violence got worse. When Todd took Xanax, Poe said, the neighborhood "was on eggshells." Poe, who in 2018 was arrested for meth possession, compared the impact of meth on Todd to Jack Nicholson's warning to Heath Ledger about playing the character of the Joker. "Like, don't get too wrapped up in this character," Poe said. "He did, and it overtook his life." Poe has a tattoo on his arm of the Joker, and another of a pit bull, in memory of Todd. He mostly dealt drugs instead of using them, and blamed himself for Todd's addiction.

In the early two-thousands, Paige Parker was married to Todd. "Two weeks after I was married to him . . . he had broke my nose, I couldn't see straight," Parker told an online-radio host in early 2019. "I was sitting there crying to myself for a second, and I'm, like, I am a strong person, but I was, like, Why was this happening?"

After that, according to Parker and to arrest reports from the time, the violence escalated. Todd broke her nose, ribs, and jaw, and bit her on the face. "I was also beaten and raped and sodomized for years by this man," she said. "I know what Brittany went through that night, because I went through it for years."

While they were married, Todd was charged with domestic violence five times, but he never went to jail for those charges. Even after Parker filed for divorce, in 2003, the violence did not end. She told the radio host that Todd had duct-taped her to a chair and threatened to throw her in the Tennessee River. In 2004, she got an order of protection.

After the divorce, Todd continued to be arrested on charges of domestic violence, including toward a woman with whom he had a child, but they were dismissed. Local law enforcement told me that his accusers often didn't show up in court, a common reason that batterers escape consequences.

Police officers remember Todd well, since they arrested him about eighty times. A former dispatcher at the Stevenson Police Department said that, around 2009, when she failed to respond to his flirtation, he backed her against a desk and tried to tear off her shirt.

"Ever since he was a juvenile, it's always been something," Billy Mason, the chief of the Jasper Police Department, told me. Mason had responded to complaints about Todd's domestic violence toward women and his father, and about mistreatment of his pit bulls. (Todd's father declined to comment.) Of twelve assault charges brought against Todd, seven were dismissed or waived.

"That's the deal with court that a police officer can't stand, because nobody stays in jail as long as they need to," Mason told me. He blamed the court system for not doing more to stop domestic abusers: "We're always the one getting the bad rap, and, you know, sometimes it's a system in the hole."

After Brittany was charged with Todd's murder, she was placed in the Jackson County jail, in Scottsboro, a squat brick-and-concrete building with ads for bail-bond agents in the lobby. Most of the inmates were there for drug offenses. In jail, Brittany said, staff did not give her Xanax, which she had been prescribed for anxiety. Jails can discontinue an inmate's medication, sometimes because they do not have the drugs on hand or because they want an inmate to detox—particularly an inmate, like Brittany, who has a history of substance abuse. But sudden withdrawal from benzodiazepines such as Xanax can lead to panic attacks and hallucinations, and, within days, Brittany had a nervous breakdown. She said she hallucinated images of Todd and of pit bulls.

Ramona, her mother, said that she received a call from Brittany in which

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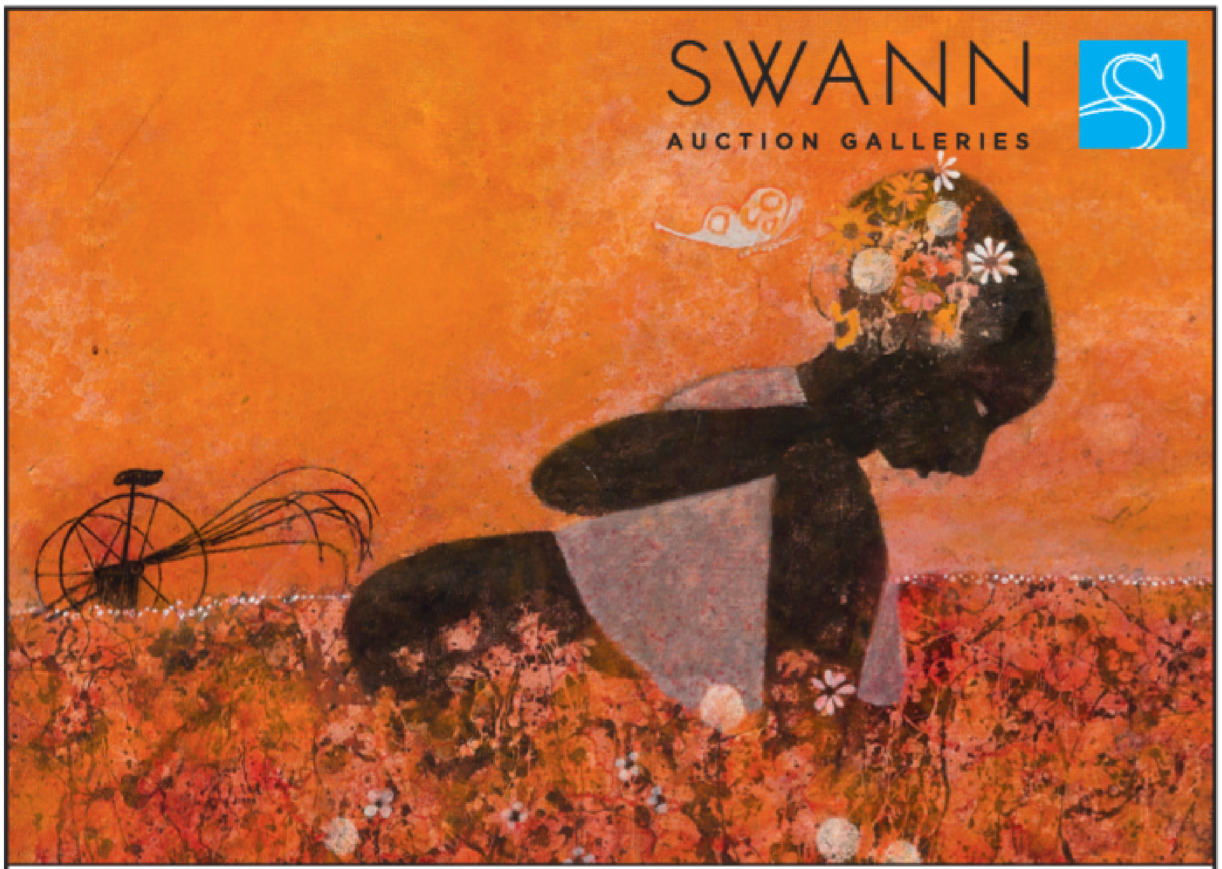

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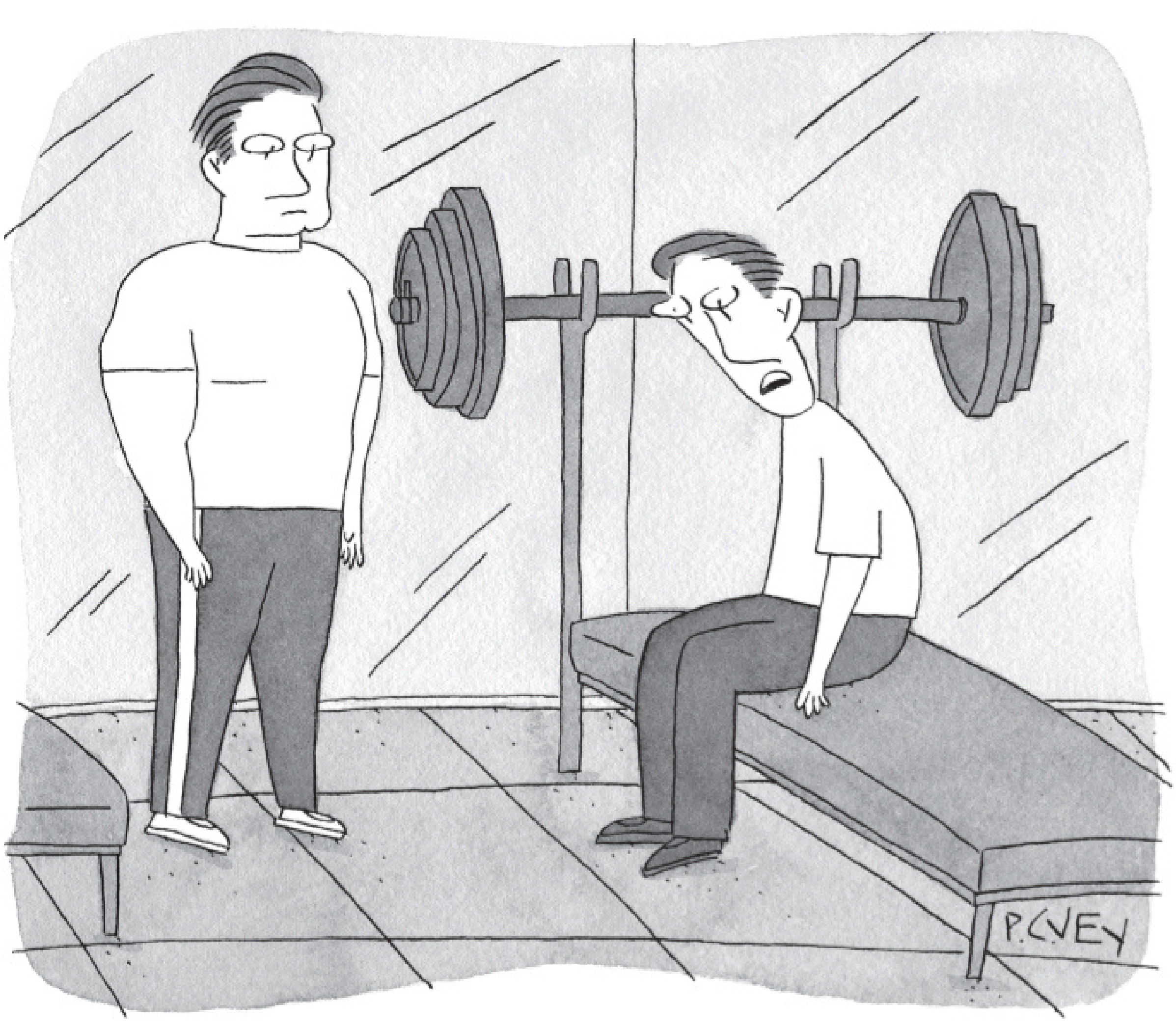

"How can I bench-press twice my weight when there are children in this world who don't even have weights?"

"she was talking crazy, and it freaked me out." Brittany said that two jailers taunted her, telling her she could push a button on an invisible elevator that would take her to see her children. (The Jackson County Sheriff's Office declined to comment on this allegation.)

A therapist who saw Brittany several times in jail wrote that she spoke "with clarity and logical thought process." He added that she found it difficult to manage without her medication.

In April, 2018, Ramona found two people in Jackson County to put up their houses as collateral for bail, and Brittany was released. She moved into her mother's home and started taking her anti-anxiety medication again, but she could not relax. Neither could Chris, who was having nightmares and screaming in his sleep. His name had been published in the local paper after Todd's death, and now he couldn't find work. People in Stevenson were gossiping about the rape and the shooting. Stories circulated that Brittany had been watching porn with Todd before the rape, that Ramona had been at the shooting, that the killing was a drug deal gone wrong. Jeff Poe, who had lived with Todd, wrote on Facebook that, two nights before the killing, he had seen Brittany naked with Todd. "I got up to piss and it looked like national geographic in the house," Poe wrote on Facebook. "I seen it with my own damn eyes what the whor did!!!" (Cindy Boldin Hicks, a friend of Brittany's, said that Brittany was at her house that night, playing cards.)

Poe reiterated his claim to me, saying that, although he believed that Todd could have beaten Brittany, he didn't think that he had raped her. "How can you rape the willin'?" Poe asked. "Can you?"

Even Todd's ex-wife, Paige Parker, who had participated in a protest in support of Brittany, later said that she didn't want to be associated with the case. She said that she believes Brittany is using Parker's story of sexual violence as her own. When I asked Parker if she'd seen the results of the rape kit detailing Brittany's injuries, she replied, "Yeah, well, that could be from rough sex."

Chris found this absurd. "All these people out here saying, 'Oh, they were dating, and it was just rough sex.' No. I'm pretty sure we all know what rough sex is," he said. "I wouldn't wish being raped on my worst enemy."

Not long after Brittany's release, she and her mother said, a man on a motorcycle began following her. Once, he watched her while she ran laps at a local park. Another time, he followed her to the gas station where she had bought cigarettes the night of the shooting. When Brittany confronted him, she said, he told her that he was a relative of Todd's, and that he was there because Todd had been shot by a "white nigger." "He was just letting me know that he knew," Brittany said. "And to let me know who he was."

That June, Brittany stopped leaving Ramona's apartment, a cramped but homey two-bedroom, except to visit her children. Chris rarely left, either, other than to try to find work. Summers in northeastern Alabama are hot and teeming with mosquitoes. At night, children chase one another on bikes, and adults smoke cigarettes on porches and talk until late. Brittany joined them on the porch, but didn't want to go with her mother to Walmart or the dollar store. To distract herself from the upcoming trial, she made funny videos on TikTok with friends online or with children in the neighborhood. In one video, Brittany performs "Where Is the Love?," by the Black Eyed Peas, with high drama. But, as she sings, her tears are real.

The court appointed a local criminal-defense and personal-injury attorney named James Mick, a former police officer, to defend Brittany, because she could not afford to hire a lawyer. There is no statewide public-defender system in Alabama, so courts often appoint private attorneys to provide defense for the indigent. These attorneys are paid little for their time and have scant incentive to take a case to trial. Mick typically handled low-level drug cases, burglaries, custody suits, divorces, and evictions.

When Mick was assigned to Brittany's case, she said, he advised her to plead guilty to manslaughter. The conviction would carry a sentence of between two and twenty years. Brittany refused, telling him that it was clear she'd shot Todd in self-defense, and she asked him to enter a Stand Your Ground defense. The statute, which was introduced in Alabama in 2006, makes it legal to use lethal force to defend oneself against threats or perceived threats, with no duty to retreat. Thirty-three states now have such laws, and advocates say that they empower people to protect themselves in grave situations. As Wayne LaPierre, the head of the National Rifle Association and a proponent of Stand Your Ground laws, has said, "The one thing a violent rapist deserves to face is a good woman with a gun."

Victor Revill, an Alabama criminal-defense attorney who has handled many Stand Your Ground claims, reviewed Brittany's case, at my request, and said that it was "Stand Your Ground all day." If Brittany won a hearing, the charges against her would be dismissed.

Mick initially filed for a Stand Your Ground hearing, but in October, 2018, he instead pursued a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity, a rare defense that is difficult to win. He requested an evaluation from a state psychologist, which would assess Brittany's competency to stand trial and her mental state at the time of the shooting. Brittany said that Mick made this decision without consulting or informing her. (Mick denies this.) According to her, they had not met in months, despite her frequent efforts to reach him. Brittany said that their only contact in the weeks before the filing had been an argument over his representation. Ramona forwarded me more than a dozen unanswered e-mails she had sent to Mick. (Mick said that Ramona is not his client.) "I just don't feel like he's fighting for Brittany," she said. I spoke to Mick in his office, and asked him about Ramona's concerns. He cut me off and said, "You can leave." He refused to speak to me again.

Sandra Goodman, the rape-victim advocate, said that Brittany saw a psychiatrist from Healing Bridge several times, and that there was nothing that indicated mental illness. "Brittany has no mental-health issues other than P.T.S.D.," Goodman said. "P.T.S.D. from the rape—and the judicial system."

After meeting with Brittany, the state psychologist wrote a report depicting her as upset and anxious. He began by noting that Brittany had eaten some ten mini Snickers bars from the receptionist's desk, which he described as unusual. (Brittany told me that she hadn't eaten that day, which was often the case, because of a lack of money.) He wrote that she had cried so much that he'd had to get tissues for her.

Brittany told me that, when she described how Todd had mimicked her voice during the rape, the psychologist laughed. Incensed, she started cursing. The psychologist noted in the report that she seemed "hostile" and "ill-at-ease." (When reached by phone and e-mail, he at first said that he didn't remember Brittany, then said that he doesn't believe Brittany's recollection is accurate.)

The psychologist suggested that Brittany suffered from paranoid thoughts. He reported that she believed Todd Smith's family was after her. "His family has a hit out on me," Brittany told him. He wrote that Brittany had trouble differentiating fantasy from reality. Yet Jeff Poe told me that, after Todd's death, he considered having Brittany killed. "I did pick up the phone after that happened and called a friend of mine," Poe told me. "I could have had something done, but I didn't want the blood on my hands."

The psychologist concluded that Brittany was showing symptoms of a psychotic disorder, which he wrote could be exacerbated or caused by substance abuse. He said that she had told him she'd relapsed on meth earlier that fall. Brittany maintains that she was not using drugs at the time of the interview.

In order to regain competency to stand trial, the psychologist wrote, she would need outpatient or inpatient treatment.

In a pretrial hearing that followed, Jason Pierce, the district attorney of Jackson County, said, "The most appropriate and perhaps the only placement for Ms. Smith would be at the Bryce Hospital," the state's oldest inpatient facility, in Tuscaloosa, which houses the seriously mentally ill. Pierce went on to suggest that the shooting may have resulted from "one of the delusions" Brittany suffered, and that, although she had passed a drug test the day before, she could have faked it. (Pierce declined to talk to me.) The judge sent her to Bryce.

Goodman was appalled. "There was nothing that should have caused her to go to Bryce," she said. "No reason, none at all."

Mary Anne Franks, a professor at the University of Miami School of Law, who wrote a study of gender disparity in self-defense law called "Real Men Advance, Real Women Retreat," argues that women have long been pathologized for acting in self-defense. Battered-woman syndrome, a theory developed by a psychologist in the nineteen-seventies, has often been deployed as a defense in cases in which a woman has killed her abuser. Franks writes that, although the argument has sometimes been successful, it is based on the idea of female irrationality. Unlike Stand Your Ground laws, which offer justification for a defendant's action, battered-woman syndrome proposes that a woman has "acted wrongly, but is so defective in some significant sense that she cannot be held accountable," Franks writes. She told me that, even when battered-woman syndrome is not mentioned in court, women who fight back "are treated pathologically, treated as if there is something wrong with their brains."

Last June, I went to see Brittany at Bryce, once known as the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane. Outside the hospital, a three-story brick building with imposing white columns, stands a statue of Hebe, the Greek goddess of youth, carrying ambrosia and nectar. Opened in 1861, Bryce was initially considered a progressive mental institution. But, as the patient population increased, the quality of care sharply declined. By 1971, conditions had deteriorated so significantly that patients filed a class-action lawsuit against the state over their mistreatment. The resulting settlement established the federal minimum standard of care for the mentally ill. Brittany was in an all-female ward, where one of her roommates told her that she had been institutionalized after skinning her sister's arm and shoulder and eating them. Another patient regularly lay on the floor and played dead, which distressed Brittany, because it reminded her of Todd. She had again been taken off her anti-anxiety medication.

In the cafeteria, a staff member watched as Brittany told me about the abuse of patients by staff. She said that, after she refused to pick up another roommate's feces, a male nurse had pushed her against the wall and twisted her arm behind her back. (Another patient confirmed the incident.) She said that the same nurse later taunted her and asked her to flash him. (A call to Bryce's patient advocate about these allegations was not returned; I later learned that he had been arrested for possession of child pornography. He has pleaded not guilty.)

Brittany kept a journal at Bryce, and had the pages mailed to her mother. "May 16: injured elbow . . . sexually assaulted in my sleep," Brittany wrote. She had woken up to her roommate touching her. "June 5: Donna hit 17 year old Jaleria."

The state psychologist had estimated that Brittany would regain competency within ninety days. But after six months she was still at Bryce, despite attention brought to her case by a piece on the Web site the Appeal. Staff members told me that she didn't belong there. Brittany said that the longer she stayed the more she feared she was going to crack, and then she'd be held longer. "There isn't another person that can keep their composure like me," she told her mother, then wept. When Ramona called Bryce to find out why Brittany was still there, she was told there was a backlog of patients to evaluate for release. (The Alabama Department of Mental Health declined to comment.)

Last September, Brittany was released from Bryce to jail, then home. Ramona videotaped her reunion with her children at a local park. Ramona told them that a surprise was waiting, and then Brittany jumped out from behind a tree. Her children rushed to her and hugged her. Her two boys began to cry.

As Brittany awaited trial, she tried to put her life back together. She nervously picked at herself, developing small scabs on her arms and her hands. She and Ramona barely ate. Most of their money had gone toward getting Brittany out of jail after Bryce. Chris had found a job, cleaning restaurants on overnight shifts. But the family still hadn't had enough to cover Brittany's bond, so Ramona had given a bondswoman the titles to her cars and her mother's wedding rings as collateral.

In October, the district attorney offered Brittany a deal: a sentence of twenty-five years if she pleaded guilty, less than she might expect if she were convicted of murder. Brittany refused to consider it. She was determined to claim self-defense, in part for her children. "I want them to know that Mommy's not a murderer, that Mommy defended herself, and that you should always defend yourself," she said.

James Mick had filed a motion requesting legal assistance, and Brittany now had another court-appointed attorney, Ron Smith. In December, once Smith had been briefed, Brittany tried to fire Mick, but later decided that it was too close to trial. Her Stand Your Ground hearing was scheduled for January, 2020. Brittany wasn't optimistic that she'd win. It seemed to her like a law that applied only to white men. When she was in Bryce, she noted the number of TV news stories about people who successfully argued Stand Your Ground. None of them were women.

In his analysis for *The New Yorker*, John Roman, the researcher from the University of Chicago, found that, over all, according to F.B.I. data, Stand Your Ground laws have actually helped both women and men win justifiable-homicide defenses. But in some states the laws have done little or nothing for women. A statistical analysis of Stand Your Ground cases in Florida, conducted by the political scientist Justin Murphy, looked at two hundred and thirty-seven incidents between 2005 and 2013. The study, which was published in *Social Science Quarterly*, in 2017, found evidence of both racial and gender bias. The gender bias applied to "domestic" cases—those which occurred on a defendant's property. The probability of conviction for a male defendant in such a case was about forty per cent; for a woman, it was about eighty per cent. The analysis suggests that, in domestic cases, Stand Your Ground works better for men than for women.

In Alabama, Roman found, no women received justifiable-homicide rulings between 2006, when the state's Stand Your Ground law was implemented, and 2010, after which the state stopped reporting its data.

Since then, a handful of women in Alabama have won Stand Your Ground immunity. But some women with persuasive self-defense claims continue to lose. In 2017, Deven Grey fatally shot her boyfriend, Barry Walsh, in Calera, south of Birmingham, during an alleged domestic dispute. Her lawyer wrote in a court filing that Walsh had been abusive throughout the relationship, and that, on the day of the killing, had "caused her substantial physical injuries," including hitting her, pistol-whipping her, and breaking bones in her face. When the police arrived, she was bleeding from the head. Walsh, with whom she had a child, had fired multiple shots in the home, her lawyer said. Yet Grey's Stand Your Ground claim was rejected, because the judge questioned whether the threat to her life had been immediate.

Before Brittany's last pretrial hearing of 2019, on a foggy, overcast day in Stevenson, she and her mother sat in their apartment and talked about what would happen next. If Brittany loses her Stand Your Ground hearing, she'll go to trial. If convicted, she will likely be sent to the Julia Tutwiler women's prison, where, in 2014, a Department of Justice investigation found rampant sexual abuse and harassment by male staff. (Alabama says that it has since made improvements.) Ramona sat on her bed, still in her pajamas, as Brittany got ready in the bathroom across the hall. Chris slept in the living room after his shift. Everyone was so exhausted that Ramona had set four alarms to wake them up.

"What kills us is that they think we're little nobodies," Ramona said. A prom photo of Brittany, in a pale-blue dress, hung on the wall. "I know they consider me a little nobody in Stevenson," Ramona continued. "Because they don't respect females. They don't respect you."

Brittany listened from the bathroom. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "I'm somebody." She straightened her hair, put on makeup and an outfit for court, and walked out the door. ◆

SHOUTS & MURMURS

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ZILLOW

BY JEN SPYRA

Ooh, honey, look at this one. Fourteen-foot ceilings, southern exposure, only a second-floor walkup. It's a tiny bit above our price range, but the monthly maintenance is low. I guess it's a little on the small side, but there's something kind of romantic about the shower being in the kitchen. Kind of Parisian, you know? Like our own little artist's studio in Montmartre!

Or, hey, this one's gorgeous. Fully renovated prewar, wraparound patio, doorman. Yes, it is nine times our budget. I noticed that. I just thought maybe we could take your stepdad up on his offer. Use the interest-free loan to get something we really love.

You're right, bad idea. I agree: why should we give Bill that power over us? Even if it does give *us* the power to live where we want. No, you're right. He's not your dad. Let's stick to the budget. Here's a cute one I found that's the right price: great light, updated appliances. It's a handicapped bathroom in a WeWork. Only a block off the 6 train!

Hmm. Just for fun, let's see what our budget gets us outside the city.

Holy shit. For a fraction of our budget, we could get an entire Trappist monastery in Junction City, Missouri! We could use the rest of our money to renovate! And get this: it includes a peach orchard! We could start a pie business!

Wait, forget the pie thing. Check this out: we can buy the mayor's mansion in Cairo, Georgia, for forty-five dollars! I'm going on Kayak. All right, you can't fly direct to Cairo, but it's only a brisk three-hour-and-fifty-seven-minute drive from Atlanta. We'd just hop on a plane to Atlanta and cruise on down to Cai-town. How fun is that? It's a hundred and sixty acres, babe! Just think what we could do with all that space. We could put in a pool. We could even host your mom and Bill for Christmas. "Christmas in Cairo!" Kind of has a nice ring to it, huh?

Where are you going?

O.K., I'll stop looking outside New York. You're right. It's insane.

I know we said a two-bedroom was a must, but this one-bed checks off some of our essentials: A block from the subway. In-unit laundry—

You raise a good point: what if we want to have a family?

Honey, I love the way you're thinking. If we have a family move in with us, we could rent them the office and the guest bath, and then we could afford a nicer place!

Oh. You mean, like, a baby. Right . . . right! Wow, did I ever luck out in the husband department. The fact that you want to start this conversation makes me feel so seen. I've actually already done a little research. A good, clean, disease-free white baby can fetch up to 90K on the open market. Now, a bank deposit of that size will raise some eyebrows, so we'll have to make a bunch of small deposits over a period of several—

Right, of course. You mean a baby to love and raise.

Wait a second. How did we miss this? Check out this two-bed between Columbus and the Park. It's got working fireplaces and a patio, and, holy shit, it's under a mil! The only thing is that you have to sign a contract agreeing to euthanize yourself on your forty-fifth birthday. Apparently, the sellers are pretty serious about overpopulation. I'm going to e-mail the broker and see if they'd be willing to wiggle on the forty-five thing. But, Jesus, look at that rainfall shower!

Ugh, it's gone. All-cash buy, too. This town. O.K., let's take a hard look at our finances and figure this out.

So, according to Chase.com, we have eighty-four thousand dollars in savings—if you count the eighty thousand dollars I'm getting from Nana whenever she dies. So, if we're just talking current liquid assets, that's 4K. I suppose we should keep in mind that we haven't paid rent this month. In which case, I think we have just enough money to go to Chipotle this evening, if neither of us gets guacamole.

You know how much I loved Princeton, but I'm really starting to have second thoughts about having gotten a Ph.D. in improv. I know it's dumb to even mention this, but what exactly were the terms of Bill's offer again? I seem to remember something about an all-cash, no-interest loan to buy any apartment on the Upper West Side that's within walking distance of him and your mom, right? Right. No, I agree, totally irrelevant!

No, I'm not texting. Really. All right, very funny. Give me my phone back. So what if I was texting with Bill? He was asking me about . . . stuff.

What did I mean by "Making progress, he's about to crack"? It's an inside joke, O.K.?

Fine. You caught me. I know he's a weird, controlling asshole, but he's a billionaire, you idiot! And he's basically offering to buy us an apartment! You wanna have kids?! Where are we gonna put kids? In a fucking drawer, like we're in a fucking Neil Simon play?

I. Teach. Improv. To. Adults! You're. A. Fucking. Playwright!

Wake up, Ethan. If we want to live in New York, we belong to Bill. But here's some good news: I just remembered that I have a coupon for a free sub at Jersey Mike's, because I got sick there last time. Let's live large, baby! ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

EXIT MUSIC

An indie band known for honesty stages a complicated comeback.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

After a yearlong hiatus, Pinegrove has sought to earn back fans' trust.

On a hot Michigan afternoon in September, 2017, Evan Stephens Hall was onstage at a music festival, tuning his guitar and thinking about his sunglasses. "I feel like it's unfortunate that I have to wear sunglasses," he said, lifting them to squint at the sun and at the crowd. "Because the eyes are the best way to let a person know that you mean it." He was joking, sort of. Hall, who is thirty, is the singer and songwriter for Pinegrove, an indie-rock band that was then assembling an unusually zealous group of fans—Pinenuts, they sometimes called themselves, with self-deprecating sincerity. There is something embarrassing about loving a band enough to give yourself a nickname, just as there is something embarrassing about singing earnest songs full of romantic complaints. "Just trust me—I mean it," Hall said, with a sheepish smile. Then he led his band through "Visiting," which seems to chronicle a long-distance entanglement ("I'm spectral for days on end, these days / With thoughts about visiting"), and which drives toward a fervent expression of confusion:

> But the truth is
> I don't know what
> I thought I knew it.

Pinegrove turns lyrics such as these into rousing and sometimes twangy rock songs, which fail to be cool in two different ways: they are equally as likely to elicit cringes from listeners who value emotional restraint as they are from those who demand fashionable innovation. And yet Pinegrove harnesses, perhaps more effectively than any other band of its era, the power of a well-turned musical confession. This music fits, loosely, into the category of emo, which began, in the nineteen-eighties, as a passionate offshoot of hardcore punk, and expanded to include a universe of bands that were simultaneously scrappy and sentimental. In the two-thousands, "emo" often denoted angsty and theatrical hard-rock bands like Fall Out Boy and My Chemical Romance, which briefly dominated MTV and the nation's high schools. But by the twenty-tens, when Pinegrove emerged, there was no sense in worrying about who would be the next Fall Out Boy; with hip-hop ascendant and MTV essentially dead, it seemed clear that there wouldn't be one. The spirit of emo was instead nurtured online and at do-it-yourself house shows, where the financial stakes were low. Pinegrove built a following in basements—first in Hall's home town of Montclair, New Jersey, and then farther afield. After a few years, Hall noticed that audiences were singing along. The band graduated from basements to clubs and got a contract with an independent record label, called Run for Cover. Pinegrove's breakthrough album, "Cardinal," released in 2016, contained "Visiting" and seven more songs that were similarly plaintive, and similarly addictive.

By the time Hall played that festival in Michigan, the Pinegrove cult was growing both more obsessive and less exclusive. An article in Vice hailed "Cardinal" as "a perfect album." The band was selling out midsize clubs nationwide, playing shows that were starting to feel vaguely religious. Fans were getting Pinegrove tattoos—often an outline of interlocking squares, like those on the cover of "Cardinal." (The actress Kristen Stewart has a Pinegrove tattoo.) After years of living with his parents, Hall had rented a house in rural upstate New York, with a big living

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

room, where the band recorded an elegant and folksy new album, "Skylight." Pinegrove seemed poised to enlarge its audience significantly, winning over grownup listeners who were drawn in by Hall's achy sincerity, even if they would never dream of attending a basement emo show.

On November 21, 2017, about two months after the Michigan concert, Hall wrote a Facebook post that changed the way people viewed him and his music. He explained that he had been "accused of sexual coercion," by a woman with whom he had had a brief relationship. His post contained nearly eight hundred words, but few details. The accusation itself was not made public, and neither was the identity of the accuser; Hall said that he was withholding the full story out of respect for her privacy. He did not admit or deny guilt, nor did he explain what "sexual coercion" entailed, except in negative terms: "i absolutely never threatened her, i never leveraged anything against her." Hall acknowledged his "privilege as a man" and as a "recognized performer," and wrote, "i am so sorry." But his penitence seemed mixed with confusion, and perhaps frustration:

> i believed all of our decisions to be based in love. still, i am coming to terms with the fact that i monumentally misread the situation. i am trying earnestly to follow this line as deeply as it goes to reflect on all of the things i could have done, and can do, better.

Hall announced that he would be "taking some time off." Pinegrove cancelled its upcoming tour dates and the planned release of "Skylight," and Hall vanished from social media.

A different kind of band might have had partisans rushing to defend their hero, but many Pinenuts, after registering their shock and anger, took a more ambivalent position, trying to balance their fandom with their concern for victims of sexual abuse. The power of Hall's music derived in part from his ability to persuade listeners to trust him. Just as hip-hop fans may expect their favorite rappers to be as tough as they say they are, many Pinenuts wanted Hall to be as thoughtful and sensitive as the narrator of the songs they loved.

A few musicians from the scene condemned Hall's statement, or his character; one compared him to the Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Many more were conspicuously silent. A fan posted a melancholy plea on Twitter:

> all I want for christmas is a clear understanding of the sexual coercion accusations toward evan stephens hall with considerate representation of the victim's voice and either a pinegrove reunion tour or a pinegrove tattoo removal kit dependent on aforementioned circumstances ok?

In September, 2018, Hall resurfaced. He told the music site Pitchfork that, at the request of his accuser, he had gone a full year without touring. A couple of months later, the band launched a comeback tour, with a concert in Montclair and another in Brooklyn, where Hall only alluded to the topic on everyone's mind. "This has been a really challenging year," he said. The band split with its label—a mutual decision, both sides maintained—and released "Skylight" independently. Online, plenty of people wondered why, in a world with no shortage of earnest indie bands, it made sense to support one with a singer accused of sexual misbehavior. But many Pinenuts returned, filling up bigger venues than ever before.

Fans trying to sort out the ethics of supporting Pinegrove didn't have much to go on. The accuser had declined to comment to Pitchfork, but she had confirmed some details through an unnamed intermediary, who explained only that Hall had applied "verbal and contextual pressure." In Hall's Facebook post, he had written, "i have been flirtatious with fans and on a few occasions been intimate with people that i've met on tour," adding that he had "reached the conclusion now that that's not ever appropriate." Some people assumed that the accusation had come from a fan.

In fact, Hall's accuser had been on tour with Pinegrove as a member of the band's crew. Although she still wishes to remain anonymous, she told *The New Yorker* that she was willing to disclose her professional experience, to make clearer the pressure that she felt when she and Hall began their relationship. An indie tour can feel

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THE NEW YORKER

like a non-stop party, or like an extended road trip, but it is also a workplace—albeit one with few written rules, and no distinct boundaries between personal and professional lives. She says that this atmosphere, combined with Hall's power as the leader of the band, gave rise to a romantic relationship that she now sees as implicitly manipulative. "He really had no control over me," she says. "But, in the bubble of tour, I really felt like he did." The relationship ended soon after the tour, and she says that it took her a while to figure out that, even though there had been no violence in the relationship, she felt damaged by it—and that she wanted Hall to take some time to reflect on the damage he had done.

Hall, too, talks about the disorienting insularity of touring. He says that, in those early days, he didn't give much thought to the fact that the people on tour with him were in some sense his employees, not merely his friends. "The culture was really one of equality," he says. "I perhaps naïvely thought there was no power structure there." He still resists the idea that he was his accuser's boss, since at the time the band was not in a position to offer anyone a long-term job or even a living wage. Of course, the leader of a burgeoning band nevertheless wields plenty of influence, no matter how little money he makes. Every rock concert involves a power dynamic: even at an egalitarian basement show, a small number of people make most of the noise, and a larger number of people do most of the listening. Hall says that, as Pinegrove has grown, the band has developed "more self-aware professional practices," with "more clearly delineated boundaries"; romantic relationships between band members and crew members are now "emphatically discouraged."

The rise of Pinegrove was a communal phenomenon, enabled by fans and fellow-musicians who became friends, all of them devoted to creating a world apart from the corporate music industry. But Hall's accuser says that, for her, this lack of structure posed a problem: she wishes that she'd had access to the indie-tour equivalent of a human-resources department. "I think that could have helped me at the time," she says. "Just having someone that I know I could call."

"Skylight" was essentially completed before the band disappeared; when Hall published the Facebook post, the label had already distributed advance copies for review. Now Pinegrove is releasing "Marigold," the first album to reflect the band's changed circumstances. On a recent snowy afternoon upstate, Hall answered the door wearing a royal-blue cardigan and hand-painted Vans, and he talked readily but carefully about "Marigold," which, he says, is the product of "a period of intense self-reflection." Pinegrove's drummer, Zack Levine, was there, too. Levine lives down the road from Hall with his wife, Nandi Rose, a former Pinegrove member, who now leads her own band, Half Waif.

Hall found emo relatively late in life. In high school, his favorite band was Radiohead, whose lyric sheets resemble postmodern collages. He started a grungy rock group with Levine, his childhood best friend. (Levine's father plays in a cover band with Hall's father, Doug, a commercial musician whose biggest hit is better known than any Pinegrove song: he wrote the infernally catchy comic-opera jingle for the financial-services company J. G. Wentworth.) Hall formed Pinegrove while studying at Kenyon College, in Ohio, and found himself drawn to richer melodies, cleaner guitars, and more forthright lyrics. Levine was a founding member, and so was his sibling, Nick Levine, whose pedal steel echoes the sorrowful sound of Hall's voice.

Early on, Hall described Pinegrove as "language-arts rock," but some of his most memorable lyrics were so matter-of-fact that they scarcely seemed to have been written at all: "I saw Leah on the bus a few months ago/I saw some old friends at her funeral." He had no evident fear of sounding solipsistic—a word that appears in the Pinegrove corpus—or of issuing, from time to time, the kind of histrionic pronouncements commonly associated with teen-agers. (From "Aphasia," a crowd favorite: "If I don't have you by me/Then I'll go underground!")

"Marigold," to be released by the esteemed British label Rough Trade, is noticeably more stoic. Hall says that he wants to avoid the perception that he is seeking sympathy or luxuriating in self-pity. "Yes, I've had plenty of emotions about what's going on," he says. "But that's not really what my focus is as an artist." A singer known for sharing his feelings is trying to be more circumspect. One of the most arresting songs on the album is "Spiral," which consists of thirty-two amphibrachs—three-syllable lines, with the stress in the middle—building toward an affirmation:

Drink water
Good posture
Good lighting
Good evening
Good morning
Good morning
Good morning
I see you.

Hall is quick to remind people that his songs are not necessarily reflections of his own life. But on "Marigold" there are plenty of parallels. "Alcove," which was inspired by a trip to California to see his extended family, is a message from a man heading into exile: "I'll go if you want." The end of the album is anticlimactic—the last song is "Neighbor," an allegory about dead animals that sounds a bit like an undergraduate writing exercise, and it is followed by a meditative six-minute instrumental track, during which the band cycles slowly between chords. But "The Alarmist," a beautiful lament in 6/8 time, suggests that Hall has not, in fact, sworn off self-pity:

It would be good to talk
For my sanity
Now do what you feel like you gotta do
But be good to me.

Hall spoke warmly of the musical community that once nurtured Pinegrove, but when asked whether he still felt like part of such a community he paused for a long while. "That's a hell of a question," he finally said. Eventually, he was saved by a scratching sound emanating from the kitchen. "Maybe a mouse," Levine said.

"Yeah, well, they're around," Hall said. "It's cold outside. Let's let 'em in."

Two years ago, the survival of Pinegrove was not assured. Many of the band's fans inhabit a musical subculture where allegations of sexual misbehavior are taken seriously, or at least more seriously than they often are elsewhere. (About a week before Hall's post, Jesse Lacey, the lead singer of the beloved emo band Brand New, was accused of soliciting explicit photographs from an underage fan; within days, the band had effectively ceased to exist.) This vigilance reflects a shift within the world of emo, long dominated by boys singing about girls, and now increasingly self-conscious about that history. It also reflects a shift in the broader culture, in which consumers are newly aware of their power to penalize public figures who misbehave—not just criminals but everyday manipulative creeps, too. The rise of music streaming has created an illusion of infinite choice: no matter what kind of music you like, there are an endless number of "artists," as Spotify calls them, eager to find a place in your playlists. On Twitter, one music critic voiced exasperation that people were still writing about Pinegrove: "THERE ARE SO MANY OTHER BANDS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!" That is true. And it is true, too, that a singer like Hall makes it impossible to listen to his music without thinking about his life. But, even in an age of abundance, great songs are a rarity. A band like Pinegrove can certainly be ignored, but, for fans, it can't easily be replaced.

Although streaming services like Spotify deliver music online, they also offer refuge from the Internet: their algorithms serve up new artists automatically while providing little information beyond names and thumbnail images. And so the release of "Marigold" will surely bring Pinegrove lots of new listeners, many of whom will know nothing about the band's backstory. Those who do know may find themselves considering whether a yearlong hiatus is satisfactory penance.

Two words – I forget what they are...
WARP
SENIOR CHARADES

Hall's accuser wants to distance herself from the band's comeback. "At the end of the year," she says, "I felt like, The year is up, do what you're going to do, and I don't want any part of it." Certainly, Hall has reacted less like someone who thinks he did an awful thing than like someone who thinks he has been thrust into an awful situation. "It's a complicated position to be in," he says. "But I'm trying to play the hand that's been dealt." Hall went to therapy weekly during his year away and is trying to live in a "more intentional" way. During one song from "Marigold," he sings, gently, "No drugs and alcohol tonight/I follow my shadow up and out the skylight." Since returning to touring, he says, he has been working toward performing all his concerts sober.

Is this enough? Some listeners will be moved by Hall's determination to keep anger at bay, but others may be disturbed that he is singing—still!—songs that seem to be about his private sorrows. There is no way to judge the sufficiency of Hall's atonement without deciding how much he had to atone for in the first place. The new Pinegrove sounds darker and more subdued, and the joyful camaraderie of early Pinegrove concerts has been replaced by a warier kind of intimacy. These days, everyone still sings along, but fewer people seem to be taking pictures. They are happy to be there, but not quite ready, perhaps, to tell the world. ♦

PROFILES

SWORD AND SHIELD

William Barr's mission to maximize executive power and protect Trump.

BY DAVID ROHDE

Last October, Attorney General William Barr appeared at Notre Dame Law School to make a case for ideological warfare. Before an assembly of students and faculty, Barr claimed that the "organized destruction" of religion was under way in the United States. "Secularists, and their allies among the 'progressives,' have marshalled all the force of mass communications, popular culture, the entertainment industry, and academia in an unremitting assault on religion and traditional values," he said. Barr, a conservative Catholic, blamed the spread of "secularism and moral relativism" for a rise in "virtually every measure of social pathology"—from the "wreckage of the family" to "record levels of depression and mental illness, dispirited young people, soaring suicide rates, increasing numbers of angry and alienated young males, an increase in senseless violence, and a deadly drug epidemic."

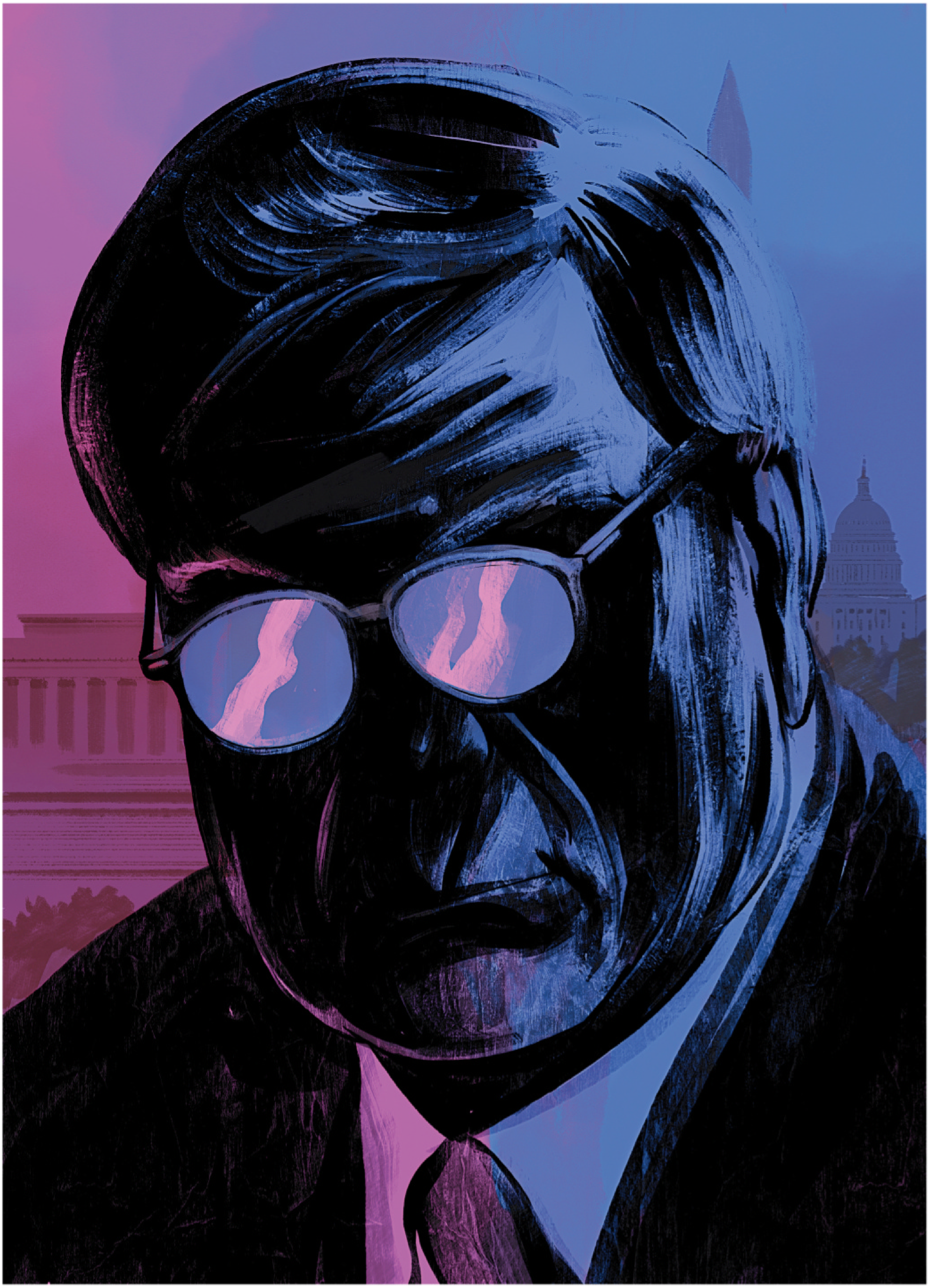
The speech was less a staid legal lecture than a catalogue of grievances accumulated since the Reagan era, when Barr first enlisted in the culture wars. It included a series of contentious claims. He argued, for example, that the Founders of the United States saw religion as essential to democracy. "In the Framers' view, free government was only suitable and sustainable for a religious people—a people who recognized that there was a transcendent moral order," he said. Barr ended his address by urging his listeners to resist the "constant seductions of our contemporary society" and launch a "moral renaissance."

Donald Trump does not share Barr's long-standing concern about the role of religion in civic life. (Though he often says that the Bible is his favorite book, when he was asked which Testament he preferred, he answered, "The whole Bible is incredible.") What the two men have in common is a sense of being surrounded by a hostile insurgency. A few days after Barr's speech, Trump told an audience at the conservative Values Voter Summit, "Extreme left-wing radicals, both inside and outside government, are determined to shred our Constitution and eradicate the beliefs we all cherish. They are trying to hound you from the workplace, expel you from the public square, and weaken the American family, and indoctrinate our children." As the effort to remove the President has gathered strength, Barr's and Trump's political interests have converged. Both men combine the pro-business instincts of traditional Republicans with a focus on culture clash and grievance. Both believe that any constraint on Presidential power weakens the United States.

Eleven months after being sworn in, Barr is the most feared, criticized, and effective member of Trump's Cabinet. Like no Attorney General since the Watergate era, he has acted as the President's political sword and shield. When the special counsel Robert Mueller released the findings of his inquiry into connections between Trump's 2016 campaign and Russia, Barr presented a sanitized four-page summary before the report was made public, which the President used to declare himself cleared. At the behest of the President, Barr launched an investigation of the F.B.I.'s Trump-Russia probe and the intelligence community's assessment that Russia intervened on Trump's behalf in the election. Rather than seek a nonpartisan commission, Barr appointed a federal prosecutor, reinforcing the President's claims of a "coup." When an exhaustive review by the Justice Department's inspector general found no evidence of political bias in the F.B.I. investigation, Barr issued a statement misrepresenting its findings and arguing that the evidence in the Russia probe was "consistently exculpatory"—leaving out the fact that five people connected to Trump's campaign have been indicted for lying to investigators.

Barr maintains that Article II of the Constitution gives a President control of all executive-branch agencies, without restriction; in practice, this means that Trump would be within his rights to oversee an investigation into his own misconduct. (Barr declined multiple interview requests.) Throughout the House's impeachment inquiry, Trump dismissed subpoenas for documents and testimony from Administration officials—a step taken by no other President. Barr and Pat Cipollone, a White House lawyer who once worked as Barr's speechwriter, have also rejected subpoenas, flouting a congressional power plainly delineated in the Constitution. Donald Ayer, who served as Deputy Attorney General under George H. W. Bush, said, "They take the position that they don't even have to show up. That's totally outrageous. It's denying the legitimacy of another branch of government in the name of executive supremacy." Ayer described Barr's ideas about Presidential power as "chilling" and "deeply disturbing." If Trump survives a trial in the Senate, a President's ability to resist congressional oversight will vastly expand. Laurence Tribe, a professor of constitutional law at Harvard, warned that Barr's and Trump's efforts could permanently alter the balance of power among the branches of American government. "If those views take hold, we will have lost what was won in the Revolution—we will have a Chief Executive who is more powerful than the king," Tribe said. "That will be a disaster for the survival of the Republic."

At the age of sixty-nine, Barr is grayer, heavier, wealthier, and more combative than he was when he served as George H. W. Bush's Attorney General, twenty-eight years ago. But his ideology has not changed much, according to friends and former colleagues. "I don't know why anyone is surprised by his



For decades, Barr has argued that Congress is a menace to the Presidency. As Attorney General, he's poised to fight back.

ILLUSTRATION BY ZOHAR LAZAR

views," Jack Goldsmith, a law professor who headed the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel during the George W. Bush Administration, told me. "He has always had a broad view of executive power."

A longtime member of the capital's legal establishment, Barr is described by both allies and adversaries as a formidable thinker who relishes debating issues of Roman history, Christian theology, and modern morality. During his first tenure as Attorney General, he earned the nickname Rage and Cave: when he felt that his principles had been violated, he tended to bluster, then gradually accept the situation. Colleagues describe him as both supportive and self-regarding, happy to delegate but impatient with incompetence. A self-styled polymath, Barr has strong opinions on issues ranging from legal arcana to the proper mustard to apply to a sandwich. He designed his own home, a sprawling house in McLean, Virginia, and is not above boasting about it. During a trip to Scotland with a friend, he quizzed the owner of a local inn about whether the paint on the wall was "Card Room Green or Green Smoke, by Farrow & Ball." The innkeeper had no idea what he was talking about.

Like other prominent conservatives, Barr formed his politics in reaction to a liberal consensus around him. He grew up on Riverside Drive, in Manhattan, among the bookish élite of the Upper West Side. As his neighbors hoped that Lyndon Johnson's Great Society would flourish, the Barr family supported Barry Goldwater for President.

Barr's mother, Mary, taught at Columbia, and worked as an editor at *Redbook*. His father, Donald, was the headmaster at Dalton, a progressive private school on the Upper East Side. During the Second World War, Donald had served in the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor to the C.I.A. As headmaster, he believed that discipline instilled morality, helping to fend off the "social pathology" that his son warned about decades later. While birth control and feminism were reshaping conventions around sex and work, Donald insisted on the old ways. Chip Fisher, who attended Dalton at the time, remembered him as brilliant but out of place: "It was like having Jonathan Edwards at the pulpit." Dalton parents saw Barr as autocratic, insular, and obsessed with adherence to rules. In the early seventies, after a protracted and ugly public fight with the school's board, he was forced out of his job.

Mary Barr, an observant Catholic, sent William and his three brothers to Corpus Christi elementary school. Even there, Barr was an outlier. In the first grade, he delivered a speech in favor of Dwight Eisenhower's Presidential campaign. Later, he declared his support for Richard Nixon, and a nun promised to pray for him. In high school, at Horace Mann, Barr—known then as Billy—presented fellow-students with a line-by-line exegesis of the Constitution. One classmate told me that Barr delighted in intellectual combat: "That smug, low-key demeanor—he really loved to push people's buttons." Garrick Beck, another classmate, disliked Barr's politics but admired his integrity. Even then, he said, Barr was convinced that only a strong President could protect America from threats. "How else does a nice guy like Barr defend this boorish tycoon?" Beck said, of Trump. "I think he is doing it because he is a true believer."

When Barr was an undergraduate, at Columbia, his classmates marched against the war in Vietnam. Barr wanted instead to buttress American power. He had told a guidance counsellor that he hoped one day to lead the C.I.A., and, during breaks from school, he spent two summers as an intern there. In 1973, he finished a master's degree in Government and Chinese Studies and returned to the C.I.A. as an intelligence analyst. At the time, a Senate investigation—known as the Church Committee—was uncovering decades of abuses at the C.I.A., and laws were being passed to curtail them. Barr later recalled the effort as a kind of assault, delivering "body blows" to the agency.

Barr spent two years as an analyst, but he was also considering a career in law. He started taking night classes at George Washington University Law School, and, in 1975, he transferred to the agency's Office of Legislative Counsel. The following year, George H. W. Bush became the C.I.A. director, and Barr helped prepare him for testimony on Capitol Hill. One hearing involved a bill that would require the C.I.A. to send a written notification to Americans whose mail the agency had secretly opened. Among the bill's sponsors was Bella Abzug, a liberal Democrat who represented Barr's old neighborhood in New York. As a defense attorney, Abzug had won a stay of execution for Willie McGee, a black man convicted of raping a white woman in Mississippi; she had also represented several Americans accused by Senator Joseph McCarthy of being Communists. The C.I.A. spied on her for twenty years, at times opening her mail.

As Abzug and her colleagues grilled Bush about the C.I.A.'s activities, Barr saw a chance to impress the new director. "I went up and sat in the seat that's behind the witness," he recalled in a 2001 oral history of the Bush Administration. "Someone asked him a question, and he leaned back and said, 'How the hell do I answer this one?' I whispered the answer in his ear, and he gave it, and I thought, 'Who is this guy? He listens to legal advice when it's given.'"

When Barr began his career in government, the idea that the Presidency was too weak might have been considered eccentric, even radical. Mostly, people were concerned that it had grown too strong. As the Watergate scandal unfolded, the former Kennedy aide Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., published an influential book called "The Imperial Presidency," in which he enumerated the habits of potential autocrats: "The all-purpose invocation of 'national security,' the insistence on executive secrecy, the withholding of information from Congress, the refusal to spend funds appropriated by Congress, the attempted intimidation of the press, the use of the White House as a base for espionage and sabotage directed against the political opposition."

Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, and embodied an image that was anything but imperial. He carried his own luggage, enrolled his daughter in public school, and shunned "Hail to the Chief" as an excessive display of pomp. More important, he enacted reforms that curtailed executive-branch power. He signed strict ethics legislation that empowered independent counsels and inspectors general to investigate waste, fraud, and abuse. Critics, including the conservative legal scholar Antonin Scalia, complained that the changes crippled the Presidency, but the new regulations had broad support from Congress and from the public.

With Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, things began to change. The Republican Party, after three decades as a minority in Congress, took control of the Senate—part of a conservative resurgence that Reagan hailed as "morning in America." In 1982, the White House hired Barr as a deputy assistant director for legal policy. He fell in with a like-minded group of young lawyers, who began devising a legal armature for the executive branch as it tried to restore its power.

In 1986, Reagan appointed Scalia to the Supreme Court. That same year, aides sent Attorney General Edwin Meese a report, recommending steps to widen the power of the Presidency. Reagan, they said, should veto more legislation, and decline to enforce laws that "unconstitutionally encroach upon the executive branch." The report outlined a legal argument that the President had unrestricted control of all executive-branch functions, and also questioned the constitutionality of special counsels and inspectors general. In a speech, Meese argued that even Supreme Court rulings should not be viewed as "the supreme law of the land." (Two years later, Meese resigned, amid accusations of helping to steer federal contracts to a friend.)

In 1987, an independent counsel was appointed to investigate whether a Justice Department official named Ted Olson had lied to Congress during testimony regarding the Environmental Protection Agency. Meese and other conservatives challenged the move as unconstitutional. In their view, independent prosecutors were nothing more than unaccountable, costly political weapons, which Democrats used to smear Republican Administrations. (In fact, according to Stephen Gillers, a professor of legal ethics at New York University's law school, both parties have sought to use such counsels for political advantage. But, he added, they remain necessary to limit abuses: "What the special counsel does is provide a check.")

The resulting case, Morrison v. Olson, went to the Supreme Court, which ruled that independent counsels did not interfere "unduly" or "impermissibly" with the powers of the executive branch. The sole dissent came from Scalia, who cautioned that a politically biased prosecutor could carry out "debilitating criminal investigations" for minor crimes. "Nothing is so politically effective," he wrote, "as the ability to charge that one's opponent and his associates are not merely wrongheaded, naive, ineffective, but, in all probability, 'crooks.'" (Ultimately, prosecutors declined to charge Olson.)

For Reagan and his aides, the Supreme Court ruling was not an abstract concern. The year before, news had broken of what became known as the Iran-Contra scandal. In an extraordinary series of crimes, the C.I.A. director William Casey and several White House aides sold sophisticated weaponry to Iran and funnelled the profits to anti-Communist rebels in Central America, in defiance of a law that specifically barred support for the group. All the while, Casey and the aides brazenly lied to Congress about their actions. When the scheme was uncovered, Reagan's poll numbers sank, but he denied knowledge of the operation and avoided impeachment.

In televised hearings, the National Security Council aide Oliver North argued that Presidents and their aides should be able to do whatever they deem necessary to protect the country from threats. Dick Cheney, then a congressman from Wyoming, argued that North and his allies had done nothing improper, because foreign policy and national security should be controlled solely by the executive branch. But Democrats and a majority of Republicans said that Congress must be able to act as a check on a wayward President. At the hearings, Daniel Inouye, a Democratic senator from Hawaii, who headed the inquiry, warned that a "cabal" of officials who believed they had a "monopoly on truth" could lead to "autocracy." Barr was unmoved. He later told an interviewer, "I think people in the Iran-Contra matter have been treated very unfairly."

When George H. W. Bush ran for President in 1988, Barr, who was then thirty-eight, seized an opportunity to continue the mission of the Reagan years. He joined the campaign as an

"Can we close the sunroof?"

adviser, and, after Bush won, he was appointed to run the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, which advises the President and all federal agencies.

Barr immediately produced a memo, arguing that Congress was a menace to the Presidency. He urged Administration officials to be alert to legislative encroachment, and cited ten recent examples, from "Micromanagement of the Executive Branch" to "Attempts to Restrict the President's Foreign Affairs Powers." He wrote, "Only by consistently and forcefully resisting such congressional incursions can executive branch prerogatives be preserved." Barr began chairing meetings in which the general counsels of executive-branch departments drafted a strategy to work against Congress. He recalled in 2001 that the President supported the mission: "Bush felt that the powers of the Presidency had been severely eroded since Watergate and [by] the tactics of the Hill Democrats." But Bush favored an incremental approach, saying, "I don't want you stretching—I think the way to advance executive power is to wait and see, move gradually."

In a series of decisions involving government actions overseas, Barr helped expand Presidential power. In 1989, Bush was in a standoff with Manuel Noriega, the strongman leader of Panama, and considered having him arrested, on charges that included drug trafficking and money laundering. The Justice Department had traditionally considered that the President lacked the power to order arrests on foreign soil. But, in June, Barr issued a legal opinion arguing that Bush had "inherent constitutional authority" to order the F.B.I. to take foreign antagonists into custody.

The following year, after the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein moved his forces into Kuwait, Bush asked at a White House meeting if he needed congressional approval to mount a counter-invasion. Barr, who by then had been promoted to Deputy Attorney General, said that the mandate to defend national security gave the President the power to go to war whenever he wanted—even to launch a preëmptive attack on Iraqi forces, if he believed that they were preparing to deploy chemical weapons against American troops.

But Barr feared that lawmakers would try to block such an action, and so he urged Bush to cover himself by obtaining Congress's support. Even the other conservatives in the room were startled; Justice Department officials were expected to maintain scrupulous impartiality. According to Barr, Cheney, at that time the Secretary of Defense, reprimanded him: "You're giving him political advice, not legal advice." Barr recalled that he said, "I'm giving him both political and legal advice. They're really sort of together when you get to this level." In August, 1990, Bush invaded Kuwait, with congressional approval. The following year, he named Barr Attorney General.

COPERNICUS

Who doesn't know how
doubt lifts the hem of its nightgown

to reveal another inch of thigh
before the face of faith?

I once didn't. I once thought I was
my own geometry,
my own geocentric planet

spinning like a ballerina, alone
at the center of the universe, at the command of a god
opening my music box
with his dirty mouth. He said

Let there be light—
And I thought I was the light.

I was a man's failed imagination.

Now I know what appears
as the motion of Heaven
is just the motion of Earth.

Not stars.
Not whatever I want.

—*Paul Tran*

Since Barr's days at Horace Mann, he has felt that the transformations of American society that began in the sixties have worsened its social problems. For decades, he registered unflinching disdain for criminal-justice reform, support for religion, and sympathy for big business. In a 1995 symposium on violent crime, he argued that the root cause was not poverty but immorality. "Violent crime is caused not by physical factors, such as not enough food stamps in the stamp program, but ultimately by moral factors," he said. "Spending more money on these material social programs is not going to have an impact on crime, and, if anything, it will exacerbate the problem." Barr also dismissed the idea of wrongful convictions. "The notion that there are sympathetic people out there who become hapless victims of the criminal-justice system and are locked away in federal prison beyond the time they deserve is simply a myth," he wrote. "The people who have been given mandatory minimums generally deserve them—richly."

As Attorney General, Barr increased sentences for drug-related crimes and cracked down on illegal immigration. In 1992, rioting erupted in Los Angeles following the acquittal of four police officers who had been videotaped beating the motorist Rodney King. Barr deployed two thousand federal agents on military planes to stop the unrest. He later argued that civil-rights charges should have been brought—not just against the offending officers but also against the rioters on the streets of L.A. "We could have cleaned that place up," he lamented in 2001. "Unfortunately, we just brought the federal case against the cops and never pursued the gangsters."

During his tenure, Barr turned down multiple requests to name prosecutors to examine potential executive-branch abuses. "The public integrity section told me that I had received more requests for independent counsel in eighteen months than all my predecessors combined," Barr recalled. "It was a joke." In one case, Barr opposed the appointment of a special counsel to investigate the Administration's dealings with Iraq before the invasion of Kuwait. Even some conservatives objected; William Safire, the *Times* columnist, called him "cover-up general Barr."

After Bush lost the 1992 Presidential election, to Bill Clinton, he blamed the defeat on Lawrence Walsh, the lead prosecutor in the Iran-Contra affair. Four days before the election, Walsh had filed a new criminal charge against former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, and revealed an entry from Weinberger's diary that cast doubt on Bush's long-running claim that he opposed trading arms for hostages. Bush was furious, Barr later recalled: "He felt that that indictment had cost him the election." On Christmas Eve, 1992, Bush pardoned four former officials whom Walsh had prosecuted, and two more who were awaiting trial—a decision that Barr supported. In a statement accompanying the pardons, Bush complained of "the criminalization of policy differences," and wrote that criticisms of the President should be expressed in "the voting booth, not the courtroom."

To Democrats, the pardons were outrageous; officials had defied Congress to carry out a dangerous and illegal scheme, which provided arms to an avowed enemy of the U.S. Barr dismissed those concerns and suggested that Walsh's investigation had unfairly hobbled the Bush Presidency. "It was very difficult because of the constant pendency of the Iran-Contra case and Lawrence Walsh, who I thought was a—I don't know what to say in polite company," he recalled in 2001. "He was certainly a headhunter and had completely lost perspective."

Three blocks from the White House, on K Street, is a storefront with signs in its windows advertising "solidarity" and "mercy and justice." The building houses the Catholic Information Center, a bookstore and a chapel where federal workers and tourists can attend morning and evening services. On a recent weekday afternoon, a sign announced an upcoming debate between conservative writers, called "Nationalism: Vice or Virtue?" A skateboard with an image of the Virgin Mary hung not far away, in the hope of attracting a younger crowd.

Led by a member of the archconservative group Opus Dei, the center is a hub for Washington's influential conservatives. Its rise began in 1998, with the arrival of a charismatic new director, the Reverend C. John McCloskey, a forty-four-year-old banker turned priest. Hard-charging and unabashedly political, McCloskey liked to say, "A liberal Catholic is oxymoronic." During the nineties, he helped convert a series of prominent conservatives to Catholicism, including the former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who is a vocal Trump backer. In 2003, McCloskey quietly left his post, and Opus Dei later paid a settlement of nearly a million dollars to a woman who said that he had sexually harassed her. But the center's board of directors remains a nexus of politically connected Catholics. Pat Cipollone and Barr have both served on the board, as has Leonard Leo, the executive vice-president of the Federalist Society. Asked about Barr's role, the center's chief operating officer, Mitch Boersma, confirmed that he had served as a board member from 2014 to 2017 but said, "We don't have anything to add."

After Bill Clinton took office, in 1993, Barr stepped away from government work and continued promoting his version of an ideal society through various religious organizations. He served on the boards of groups whose charitable work is widely praised, such as the Knights of Columbus and the New York Archdiocese's Inner-City Scholarship Fund. For years, Barr has paid the tuition of eighteen students a year at a parochial school in New York.

But Barr's instinct for ideological combat did not wane. In 1995, he wrote an article for a journal called *The Catholic Lawyer*. Two years earlier, the F.B.I. had mounted a disastrous raid on a compound inhabited by a cult in Waco, Texas. In his article, Barr complained that journalists had made "subtle efforts" to liken the cult to the Church. "We live in an increasingly militant, secular age," he wrote. "As part of this philosophy, we see a growing hostility toward religion, particularly Catholicism." He argued that religious Americans were increasingly victimized: "It is no accident that the homosexual movement, at one or two percent of the population, gets treated with such solicitude, while the Catholic population, which is over a quarter of the country, is given the back of the hand."

His position on executive power wavered over time, depending on which party controlled the White House. When Clinton was under investigation in the Whitewater affair, a Senate committee subpoenaed documents, and Clinton's team claimed that they were protected by lawyer-client privilege. Barr called the rationale "preposterous," and later complained that Clinton had diminished his office: "I've been upset that a lot of the prerogatives of the presidency have been sacrificed for the personal interests of this particular president." When George W. Bush entered the White House, Barr resumed his arguments that the President should have "maximum power" in national security. In op-eds and in congressional hearings, he spoke in favor of military tribunals, the Patriot Act, and sweeping surveillance. In the Obama years, as Republicans in Congress launched a campaign to thwart the President's initiatives, Barr largely went silent again.

In the private sector, Barr built a reputation as a pugnacious opponent of federal regulation. As the general counsel of G.T.E., one of the country's largest telephone companies, he persuaded regulators to approve mergers that benefitted his employer while arguing against those which benefitted rivals. Around the office, he talked at times about such moral doctrines as natural law, but never expected secular colleagues to share his beliefs. Barr didn't socialize much with co-workers; he commuted each week to New York from Washington, where he and his wife, Christine, raised three daughters amid a Catholic community centered on a tight circle of churches, schools, and social clubs. The girls went to a Catholic school in Bethesda, where Christine worked as a librarian. (Barr's daughters later attended Catholic colleges, and all became lawyers.)

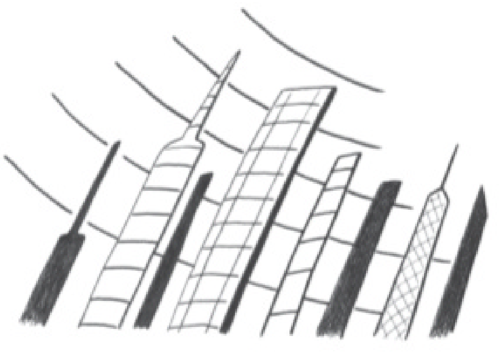
After years of government work, Barr began to grow rich. He helped lead G.T.E. when it merged with Bell Atlantic to form Verizon, the country's largest telephone company. From 2001 to 2007, he was paid an average of $1.7 million a year in salary and bonuses, in addition to stock options, the use of a company jet, and a spending allowance. When Barr took an early retirement, in 2008, he received twenty-eight million dollars in deferred income and separation payments—a large enough sum that a watchdog group cited the payouts as an example of poor corporate governance. Barr had amassed a fortune that *Forbes* recently estimated at forty million dollars, and he made millions more serving on corporate boards, including those of Time Warner and Dominion Energy. He also joined Kirkland & Ellis, a Washington firm known for its leading conservative lawyers. And he and Christine built their house in McLean, a few miles from C.I.A. headquarters.

In July, 2012, Barr learned that his youngest daughter, Meg, had a recurrence of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Meg, who was then twenty-seven years old, faced a roughly twenty-per-cent chance of survival. He stopped working and focussed on his daughter's care. The family had Meg treated at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, in Boston, and Barr and his wife moved to be near her. After Meg underwent chemotherapy and a stem-cell transplant, Barr rented a house in the town of Scituate, outside Boston, so that Meg could be isolated from other patients and avoid infection. They read books, walked on the beach together, and talked about what Meg would do if she survived. "Those three months were the best and worst of times," Meg told Fox News in 2019. "The hardest part of my illness was accepting the randomness of it, the fact that you can't control the outcome. Both my father and I tend to be control freaks."

Meg survived. But, Barr told Fox, "Meg's illness changed our family. It changed me." Friends of Barr's said that he approached both his professional life and his personal life with a renewed zeal. Chuck Cooper, a litigator who worked with Barr in the Reagan Administration, told me, "I think he has an intense appreciation for life and our tenuous hold on it. And that to squander any of it is unforgivable."

Barr was late to join the Trump revolution. In the nineties and the early two-thousands, he donated more than half a million dollars to Republican candidates, mostly such mainstream figures as George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. (Barr even supported Jeff Flake, the Arizona senator whose occasional criticisms of Trump ended up turning constituents against him.) In 2016, Barr gave twenty-seven hundred dollars to Trump's campaign—and about twenty times that amount to support Jeb Bush.

After Trump won, though, Barr demonstrated a convert's enthusiasm, writing op-eds for the Washington *Post* in which he endorsed Trump's controversial positions. When Sally Yates, the acting Attorney General, refused to carry out a ban on travellers from predominantly Muslim countries, Barr accused her of "obstruction," and assailed news coverage of the situation. "The left, aided by an onslaught of tendentious media reporting, has engaged in a campaign of histrionics unjustified by the measured steps taken," he wrote. In another article, Barr criticized Robert Mueller for hiring prosecutors who had donated to Democratic politicians—but did not disclose his own donations to Republicans.



In February, 2017, Trump appointed his first Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, and quickly grew disenchanted. When Sessions recused himself from the Mueller investigation, Trump asked, "Where's my Roy Cohn?"—a reference to his former personal lawyer, who was a close aide to Senator McCarthy during the Red Scare of the fifties. According to Bob Woodward's reporting, Trump lambasted Sessions as a "dumb southerner" and "mentally retarded." (Trump has denied this.) That fall, Sessions ignored Trump's demand to appoint an independent counsel to investigate a debunked theory about Hillary Clinton's role in the sale of uranium to Russia. The *Times* contacted ten former Attorneys General for comment, and Barr was the only one to reply. "There is nothing inherently wrong about a president calling for an investigation," he said. Barr added that he saw more basis for an investigation in the uranium deal than in any supposed collusion between Trump and Russia. "To the extent it is not pursuing these matters, the department is abdicating its responsibility," he wrote.

Barr has said that he wasn't interested in the position of Attorney General. But in June, 2018, he sent an unsolicited, nineteen-page legal memo to Rod Rosenstein, the Deputy Attorney General, who was overseeing the Mueller investigation. He spent much of the letter elaborating an argument that a President's Article II powers rendered him essentially incapable of obstructing justice. He acknowledged that such blatant acts as destroying evidence and encouraging perjury were impermissible. But, he wrote, "Mueller's core premise—that the President acts 'corruptly' if he attempts to influence a proceeding in which his own conduct is being scrutinized—is untenable." Benjamin Wittes and Mikhaila Fogel, of the blog Lawfare, described the memo as "bizarre." Barr, without firsthand knowledge of the facts in the case, had devised a legal theory of obstruction, attributed it to Mueller, and then declared it "fatally misconceived."

Barr had strong advocates. Cipollone, his former speechwriter and fellow board member at the Catholic Information Center, lobbied on his behalf. Laura Ingraham, the Fox News host, added her support. After the midterm elections, Trump forced out Sessions and nominated Barr, calling him "my first choice since Day One."

On January 15, 2019, Barr arrived on the Hill for confirmation hearings, accompanied by his wife and daughters. Many Democrats in Congress, particularly those who hadn't studied Barr's record, hoped that he would be an institutionalist who would curb Trump's legal excesses. They also faced a stark political reality: they did not have the votes to block his nomination. Ignoring the advice of some aides, Democrats did not dwell on Barr's statements regarding criminal justice, or on whether his religious beliefs might affect his views.

Most of the hearings focussed on how Barr would handle the release of the Mueller report. In his opening statement, he repeated a reassuring pledge that he had made at his confirmation hearings as Bush's nominee: "The Attorney General must insure that the administration of justice—the enforcement of the law—is above and away from politics." He testified that he believed that Mueller, a longtime associate whom he described as a "good friend," should be allowed to complete his investigation. But he also signalled skepticism about the idea that Trump had colluded with Russia, and repeatedly expressed support for the President's policies. Four weeks later, he was confirmed, in a largely party-line vote, as Trump's second Attorney General.

On February 14, 2019, Barr took over a Justice Department plagued by dissension and low morale. Trump's public attacks on Sessions and Mueller had unnerved staffers. And though career employees supported Sessions's decision to recuse himself from the Mueller investigation, some staffers said that he was distant and seemed over his head in meetings. "When he got confused or distracted, which seemed pretty often, he would tell some story about a bank robbery in Mobile," a former department official said. "He was a nice enough man, but I don't think he had any idea what we did for a living."

Current and former Justice Department officials told me that the main problem was not Sessions but Trump, whose Administration required them to defend contorted legal positions. Under Sessions, the department defended the travel ban, a prohibition on transgender people joining the military, a policy of separating immigrant children from their parents, and a dismissal of claims that the President had violated the emoluments clause. Several career officials declined to put their names on legal memos. "Morale has been low since Trump came in," Matthew Collette, a former senior official who worked for thirty years at the Justice Department, told me. "The incredibly controversial and difficult cases started and kept coming."

When past Presidents resisted sending materials to Congress by claiming "executive privilege," Justice Department lawyers tried to help resolve the disputes. Under Trump, that practice has stopped, Senator Sheldon Whitehouse told me. As Brett Kavanaugh was going through confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, Congress requested documents describing his work in the George W. Bush Administration. The White House refused access to more than a hundred thousand pages of them. Blank sheets of paper arrived on Capitol Hill stamped "Constitutional privilege," a category that members of Congress said they had never heard of before.

Rather than avoiding the partisanship of the Trump era, Barr's actions have placed his department at its center. One divisive fight has been over immigration. In March, 2018, the Administration announced that it intended to add a citizenship question to the forthcoming national census—a measure that liberals said was designed to disadvantage Hispanics. The effort fuelled bitter division in the department. Collette said that lawyers were comfortable with implementing a new Administration's policy priorities, but not with "twisting legal views to fit the personal views or needs of the President."

Barr has steadfastly supported Trump's crackdown on immigrants. He directed judges to deny some migrants the opportunity to post bail, and restricted migrants' ability to claim asylum based on connections to family members who face threats of violence. The Justice Department is trying to reverse a recent court decision that helps protect people from fast-track deportations. It has also sued "sanctuary cities," in California and other states, which offered to protect migrants fleeing the crackdown.

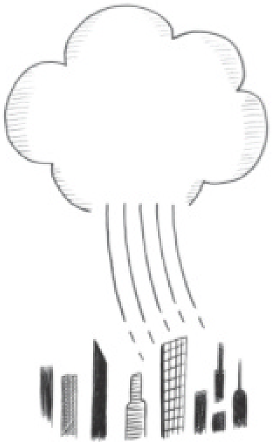
After months of fierce legal battles, the Supreme Court ruled against the Administration in its bid to add a citizenship question to the census. In a 5–4 decision, Chief Justice John Roberts concluded that the "sole stated reason" for the change "seems to have been contrived."

Trump responded to the defeat by issuing an executive order, giving the President the ability to collect the citizenship data by other means. Legal

"'Ode to Joy'! 'Ode to Joy'! Play 'Ode to Joy'! 'Ode . . .'"

experts widely dismissed the order as a pointless fig leaf, but, in a Rose Garden ceremony, Barr declared it a triumph. Standing a few feet from Trump, he said, "Congratulations again, Mr. President, on taking this effective action."

Barr showed no sign of tempering Trump's instincts. Chris Murphy, a Democratic senator from Connecticut, told me, "I think he was nominated for his ability to protect Trump. His belief in executive power was his primary qualification." In high-profile cases, Barr has repeatedly aided Trump politically. When Barr issued his summary of the Mueller report, he quoted part of a sentence saying that no conclusive proof of collusion had been found, but left out the rest, which suggested that Russia and the Trump campaign had worked at arm's length toward similar goals. He mentioned that the report identified potential incidents of obstruction of justice, but did not enumerate or describe them. (There were ten, including Trump's firing of the F.B.I. director James Comey, who had declined to promise him loyalty.)



Three days later, Mueller wrote Barr a letter, complaining that the summary "did not fully capture the context, nature, and substance" of his report and had created "public confusion about critical aspects of the results of our investigation." Mueller had prepared an introduction and executive summaries, and he urged Barr to release them. Barr declined, and took another three weeks to redact the full report, allowing Trump's claim of "total exoneration" to dominate the news.

When Barr finally released the report, in April, he held a press conference before journalists had access to it, which prevented them from asking detailed questions about its contents. Barr repeated four times that no collusion had been found and argued that "the President was frustrated and angered by a sincere belief that the investigation was undermining his Presidency, propelled by his political opponents, and fuelled by illegal leaks." Four days later, congressional Democrats subpoenaed Don McGahn, the White House counsel, who had witnessed some of Trump's potential acts of obstruction; the Justice Department issued a legal opinion that he was not required to testify.

Trump has often advanced a revisionist view of the 2016 election, claiming that Ukraine interfered and playing down Russia's role. In his telling, the F.B.I.'s inquiry was a secret effort, endorsed by Barack Obama, to spy on his campaign. A government official, who asked not to be named, told me that, while Barr does not believe that the "deep state" is plotting to force Trump from power, he is convinced that there was something nefarious in the F.B.I.'s conduct of its investigation. Last April, Barr spoke about the matter before a Senate subcommittee. "Spying on a political campaign is a big deal," he said. "I think spying did occur. The question is whether it was adequately predicated."

By then, the Justice Department's inspector general, Michael Horowitz, had spent thirteen months on an investigation of the F.B.I.'s handling of the Trump-Russia probe. But Trump directed Barr to begin his own investigation, and also to look into the intelligence assessment that Russia aided his candidacy. Trump gave Barr a far-reaching power: to unilaterally declassify top-secret documents in order to review the work of the country's intelligence agencies.

To conduct the probe, Barr appointed John Durham, the U.S. Attorney in Connecticut, who, during the Obama Administration, investigated the C.I.A.'s use of torture against suspected terrorists. Barr and Durham made trips to the U.K., Italy, and Australia, where they asked officials for evidence of misconduct by the F.B.I. and the C.I.A. Ron Wyden, a Democratic senator from Oregon, who has served on the Intelligence Committee since 2001, told me that Barr was ignoring Justice Department norms: "He is flying around the world trying to get evidence that would confirm these bizarre conspiracy theories and exonerate Russia." Intelligence officials worried that the trips would make longtime allies hesitant to share information with the U.S., for fear of being drawn into a partisan fight.

David Laufman, a former senior counter-intelligence official at the Justice Department who helped investigate Russian interference, said that the probe has also sent a clear message to U.S. officials: challenge Trump at your peril. "We're into Crazy Town," Laufman told me. The investigation, he said, was "evocative of regimes in history that conduct purges for perceived disloyalty."

Barr's convictions about the place of faith in government are widely shared in the Administration. The day of his Notre Dame speech, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered an address called "Being a Christian Leader," in Tennessee. "I know some people in the media will break out the pitchforks when they hear that I ask God for direction in my work," Pompeo said. "I'm proud to say that President Trump has let our State Department do that. Indeed, he has demanded that we do." Pompeo is an evangelical Christian; many of his peers in Trump's inner circle are conservative Catholics, who have achieved a degree of influence rivalling that of evangelicals in the George W. Bush Administration. Along with Barr and Cipollone, there are the acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney; the White House counsellor Kellyanne Conway; the National Economic Council director, Larry Kudlow; and the former chief strategist Steve Bannon. Leonard Leo, of the C.I.C. and the Federalist Society, has guided Trump in his selection of judges.

An Administration official acknowledged that religious leaders "are acutely aware of Trump's shortcomings" but also recognize his value to their cause. "Name a political leader who has done more for conservatives," the official said. Trump has reshaped the country's legal system, appointing two Supreme Court Justices and a hundred and sixty-two other judges, most of whom can be counted on to rule with conservative principles in mind. Barr's Justice Department has supported efforts to restrict access to abortion, and has aided attempts to secure taxpayer funding for Christian schools. Barr has also helped Trump restore the use of the federal death penalty, which Presidents of both parties have frozen for sixteen years.

Barr likes to describe Trump as the heir to Ronald Reagan. But in some ways his Administration, with its fixation on enemies and its willingness to bend laws for political gain, is more reminiscent of Richard Nixon's. In September, Honda, Ford, Volkswagen, and BMW agreed with California to observe emissions standards tougher than those endorsed by the White House. After the Administration derided the move as a "P.R. stunt," the Justice Department opened an antitrust investigation of the automakers. Barr's work on the President's behalf extends to keeping his tax returns secret. Last year, Trump's personal lawyers argued that his financial records should not be given to New York City prosecutors, who were investigating whether he had made an illegal payment to the adult-film actress Stephanie Clifford. The Justice Department filed an amicus brief, arguing that turning over the records would "impose substantial burdens on the President's time, attention, and discharge of his constitutional duties." Stephen Gillers, the legal-ethics professor, argued that Barr was failing to challenge Trump when he should. "We don't have an Attorney General now," he said. "We have an additional lawyer for the President."

Last September, an explosive news story involving Barr strained the distinction between these roles. An unnamed whistle-blower had filed a complaint, based on a phone call between Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine. In the call, Trump urged Zelensky, who was dependent on U.S. military aid, to investigate Biden for links to corrupt behavior. He suggested that he talk to his personal lawyer, Rudolph Giuliani—and also to Barr.

Barr denied any role in the matter and said that he had never spoken with Zelensky. Meanwhile, the Justice Department halted the whistle-blower's complaint. First, the Office of Legal Counsel ruled that the complaint was not an "urgent concern" and therefore did not need to be handed over to congressional oversight committees. Then the department's Criminal Division dismissed the whistle-blower's allegation that the President had broken a federal law forbidding candidates to solicit support from foreigners. The department reasoned that a publicly announced Ukrainian investigation into Biden's conduct cannot be a campaign contribution, because there is no way to precisely enumerate its value.

On November 15th, Marie Yovanovitch, the former Ambassador to Ukraine, testified before the House about being forced out of her position, by what she described as a "smear campaign." As she spoke, Trump simultaneously assailed her on Twitter, an experience that she described as "very intimidating." That same day, Barr gave a fiery speech to the Federalist Society. "In waging a scorched-earth, no-holds-barred war of resistance against this Administration, it is the left that is engaged in the systematic shredding of norms and undermining the rule of law," he said. He portrayed the President as a victim of "encroachment" by the other branches of government. "There is a knee-jerk tendency to see the legislative and judicial branches as the good guys, protecting the people from a rapacious would-be autocrat," Barr said. "This prejudice is wrongheaded and atavistic."

In December, Michael Horowitz released a report on his investigation of the F.B.I., which Barr and his allies hoped would support their argument. For months, Trump and Fox News commentators had predicted that Horowitz's report would find clear political bias. Instead, it concluded that Trump's allegations of an F.B.I. "coup" were false.

The report—based on more than a hundred and seventy interviews and a million-plus pages of documents—did find misconduct, most of it involving applications to the Federal Intelligence Surveillance Court. During the campaign, low-level F.B.I. officials had asked for permission to wiretap Carter Page, a former Trump foreign-policy adviser. While doing so, a lawyer falsified an e-mail to make it appear that Page was not coöperating with the C.I.A., when the opposite was true. Agents also withheld concerns about the reliability of allegations against Trump compiled by the former British intelligence officer Christopher Steele.

Horowitz's work showed that the government's secretive surveillance process requires significant reform. But the report found that the opening of the probe was legally justified, and that the officials' failures did not induce leaders

"Mom, Dad, this is Jason, the pickpocket I was telling you about."

"We're not a seafood restaurant—this building has a pretty severe lobster infestation."

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to commit improper acts. "We did not find documentary or testimonial evidence that political bias or improper motivation influenced the decisions," Horowitz wrote. (A separate investigation into Peter Strzok, a senior counter-intelligence agent who had sent scornful text messages about Trump, came to a similar conclusion.) James Baker, the former general counsel of the F.B.I., told me that the Bureau began the investigation before receiving a copy of the Steele dossier and before the Page e-mail was altered. At the time, Democratic Party communications stolen by Russia were circulating online, and Trump had publicly called for Russia to steal and release Hillary Clinton's e-mails; several of his campaign officials had been in contact with Russian officials and with suspected intelligence operatives. "We have an obligation to protect the United States from Russia," Baker said. "Presented with the same facts, I would open the investigation again."

Barr released a response to the report, disputing Horowitz's conclusions. Despite the core finding that the investigation was initiated properly, Barr argued that the report "makes clear that the F.B.I. launched an intrusive investigation of a U.S. presidential campaign on the thinnest of suspicions." Durham, the federal prosecutor appointed to carry out a separate investigation, suggested that he and Barr had gathered evidence that contradicted Horowitz. "We advised the inspector general that we do not agree with some of the report's conclusions as to predication and how the F.B.I. case was opened," he said. This statement violated a Justice Department practice of not commenting on investigations until they are finished.

Trump went further, suggesting that Horowitz was part of a cabal formed in the previous Administration. "Remember that I.G. Horowitz was appointed by Obama," he tweeted. "There was tremendous bias and guilt exposed, so obvious, but Horowitz couldn't get himself to say it. Big credibility loss. Obama knew everything!"

Christopher Wray, the F.B.I. director, immediately admitted the Bureau's errors and announced forty reforms designed to prevent improper surveillance. But, in a television interview, he pushed back about other false claims. When asked about Trump's calls for an investigation into Ukraine's meddling in the election, Wray replied, "We have no information that indicates that Ukraine interfered." Wray also urged Americans to vet their sources of information. "There's all kinds of people saying all kinds of things out there," he said. "And I think part of us being well protected against malign foreign influence is to build together an American public that's resilient, that has appropriate media literacy, and that takes its information with a grain of salt."

After Wray defended the F.B.I., Trump attacked him as well. "I don't know what report current Director of the FBI Christopher Wray was reading, but it sure wasn't the one given to me," he tweeted. "With that kind of attitude, he will never be able to fix the FBI, which is badly broken despite having some of the greatest men & women working there!"

Wray is still in his job, but others have faced significant consequences. One of these is Dan Coats, the director of National Intelligence, a moderate Republican who publicly questioned some of Trump's claims. Last summer, after months of pressure, Coats resigned, and Trump suggested replacing him with John Ratcliffe, a congressman from Texas who has trafficked in conspiracy theories. (After evidence suggested that Ratcliffe may have exaggerated his résumé, the White House withdrew the nomination; the position remains vacant.) Trump also revoked the security clearance of the former C.I.A. director John Brennan, who has criticized him. Agents recognized the implications; many intelligence officials, after years of low-paying government work, rely on their security clearances to obtain private-sector jobs when they retire. More recently, the President denounced the whistle-blower in the Ukraine case, who has subsequently received many death threats. When the threats spike, armed agents drive him to and from work.

In dozens of interviews, current and former law-enforcement and intelligence officials said that three years of Trump's Twitter attacks, conspiracy theories, and high-profile firings have left their leaders wary of speaking in public, testifying before Congress, or talking to reporters. They know that they will be asked about Trump's false claims. If they respond accurately, they risk being fired for contradicting the President.

The country's intelligence agencies continue to produce private assessments that counter Trump's specious assertions. They affirm that Russia, not Ukraine, interfered in the 2016 election and predict that it is likely to meddle again in 2020, according to members of the House and the Senate Intelligence Committees. The F.B.I. and the C.I.A. have also assessed that white nationalists and ISIS members represent continued threats, issues that Trump has downplayed. But agency directors believe that they can best protect their institutions by keeping such concerns private. "Survival is victory," the government official told me. "If you are able to go out on your own terms, or go out last, it's a victory for the institution."

If Barr's inquiry results in criminal charges, it would be a radical departure from past practice. When Durham investigated C.I.A. officers for torture, he pressed no criminal charges. Previous investigations into intelligence failures that cost American lives—such as missing warning signs before the 9/11 attacks or wrongly concluding that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction—carried no possibility of criminal sanction. James Clapper, who was the director of National Intelligence in 2016, cautioned that the election assessment is a work of analysis. "If a prosecuting attorney is investigating analysts for their intelligence judgments, that's not good," Clapper said. James Baker worried that Trump's intimidation of investigators would have consequences at the F.B.I. "It could reduce the willingness to give frank assessments or to pursue controversial cases," he said, adding, "I'm nervous about the institution."

In private gatherings, current and former F.B.I. agents and Justice Department officials register exhaustion at Trump's attacks on the F.B.I. Recent retirees told me that they were surprised by how little they missed working at the Bureau.

Some agents have embraced Wray's admonition to do their work and ignore the political brawl around them. After two and a half years on the job, Wray, a low-key former prosecutor and corporate lawyer, has inspired loyalty for handling a difficult situation gracefully. The Bureau, like the country, is deeply divided; even some agents who find Trump personally distasteful say that they support his policies. Comey was a popular director, but agents complain that his calls for people to vote against Trump play into conspiracy theories about the Bureau. The clearest sentiment is disdain for the political class. Last winter, during the longest government shutdown in U.S. history, the Bureau's thirteen thousand agents and twenty thousand support staffers struggled to pay their bills. After employees walked into supervisors' offices in tears, agents set up impromptu food banks to help colleagues. Trump caused the shutdown by demanding that Congress fund his border wall with Mexico, but many agents argued that politicians on both sides were responsible. "They didn't do their job," Tom O'Connor, a retired F.B.I. agent, told me.

The political combat of the Trump era was breeding apathy and disgust. F.B.I. and Justice Department officials said that if Trump was reëlected there would be an exodus of employees. Some retired agents fear that the institution will not survive another four years.

Stephen Gillers suggested that Trump's attacks were part of a drive for increased power. "One way that Trump seeks to maximize control is minimizing the disclosure of information and undermining the credibility of information," he said. "The Congress needs information to do its job, and the President has frozen it out—especially in the impeachment investigation. Another check is the media, and the President's use of the term 'fake news' can cause people to lose faith in the media. What remains are the courts, which are slow and cumbersome."

Donald Ayer, the former Bush Administration Deputy Attorney General, warned that Barr's interpretations of executive power could be validated. "The ultimate question is what happens when these reach the Supreme Court, which has two Trump appointees," he said. "There is a real danger that he succeeds." Some legal analysts believe that Barr is overplaying his hand. Benjamin Wittes, of Lawfare, predicted that the Supreme Court would reject Barr's extreme positions, creating precedents that ultimately reduce the power of the Presidency. "The idea that the President gets to assert executive privilege over material that has already been made public is laughable," Wittes told me. "I think they are very likely to lose a lot of this."

Chuck Cooper, the conservative litigator, disagreed. He said that Barr's tenure represented the achievement of the legal project launched during the Reagan Administration. "He is building and extending on a foundation," Cooper said. "It was popularized and very robustly advanced by the Meese Justice Department." Last October, in the Oval Office, Trump awarded Meese the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor. Barr attended, and Meese thanked him for carrying on his legacy: "You've risen to continue the string of great Attorneys General in this country."

As Barr insists on expanded Presidential power, Republican voters are starting to agree. According to the Pew Center, forty-three per cent of Republicans believe that "presidents could operate more effectively if they did not have to worry so much about Congress and the courts." That number has increased from fourteen per cent when Trump took office. A House G.O.P. report about Ukraine endorsed his singular authority; slightly misquoting John Marshall, it argued that Trump was, "constitutionally, the 'nation's sole organ of foreign affairs,' " and thus had unlimited latitude in his dealings with Ukraine.

Ayer fears that Barr has combined a Reagan-era drive to dismantle government with a Trump-era drive to politicize it. As the White House succeeds in holding off congressional attempts at removing Trump from office, Barr is winning his long war on the power of the legislative branch. In the 2020 campaign, Trump will argue that he alone can protect the country from the dangers posed by the left, immigrants, and other enemies. And Barr's vision of Presidential power will be the Party's mainstream position. "Barr sought out the opportunity to be Donald Trump's Attorney General," Ayer said. "This, I believe, was his opportunity—the opportunity of a lifetime—to make major progress on advancing his vision of an all-powerful Chief Executive." ♦

ANNALS OF NATURE

THE BRISTLECONES SPEAK

The earth's oldest trees bear news about our deep past, and our possible future.

BY ALEX ROSS

Bristlecone pines have the look of survivors, not conquerors. Fittingly, they found fame during the Cold War, when atomic tests

were taking place not far off, in the Nevada desert. Bristlecones are post-apocalyptic trees, sci-fi trees.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN CHIARA

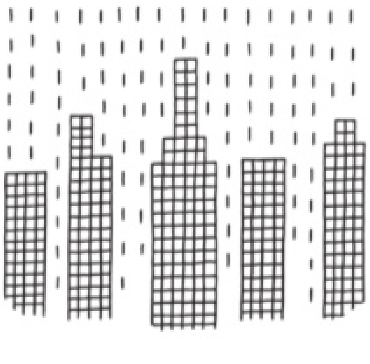
About forty-five hundred years ago, not long after the completion of the Great Pyramid at Giza, a seed of *Pinus longaeva*, the Great Basin bristlecone pine, landed on a steep slope in what are now known as the White Mountains, in eastern California. The seed may have travelled there on a gust of wind, its flight aided by a winglike attachment to the nut. Or it could have been planted by a bird known as the Clark's nutcracker, which likes to hide pine seeds in caches; nutcrackers have phenomenal spatial memory and can recall thousands of such caches. This seed, however, lay undisturbed. On a moist day in fall, or in the wake of melting snows in spring, a seedling appeared above ground—a stubby one-inch stem with a tuft of bright-green shoots.

Most seedlings die within a year; the mortality rate is more than ninety-nine per cent. The survivors are sometimes seen growing in the shadow of a fallen tree. The landscape of the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, as this area of the White Mountains is called, is littered with fragments of dead trees—trunks, limbs, roots, and smaller chunks. *Pinus longaeva* grows exclusively in subalpine regions of the Great Basin, which stretches from the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada to the Wasatch Range, in Utah. Conditions are generally too arid for the dead wood to rot; instead, it erodes, sanded down like rock. The remnants may harbor nutrients and fungi that help new trees grow. Bristlecones rise from the bones of their ancestors—a city within a cemetery.

Coast redwoods and giant sequoias, California's gargantuan world-record-holding trees, can grow fifty feet or more in their first twenty years. Bristlecones rise agonizingly slowly. After four or five years, the seedling on the steep slope would have been just a few inches higher, sprouting needles in place of the embryonic shoots. The needles are a deep green, tough, resinous, and closely bunched, in groups of five. On a mature tree, they live for fifty years or more. Decades may have passed before the tree was human height, and decades more before it resembled a conventional pine. Bristlecone saplings grow straight up, with relatively sparse foliage, looking like undernourished Christmas trees. After a few hundred years—by which time the Old Kingdom of Egypt had fallen—it was probably forty or fifty feet in height.

Many tree species live for hundreds of years. A smaller but not inconsiderable number, including the sequoias and certain yews, oaks, cypresses, and junipers, survive for thousands. Once a bristlecone has established itself in the unforgiving conditions of the White Mountains, it can last almost indefinitely. The trees tend to grow some distance from one another, so fires almost never destroy an entire stand. Because only a few other plant species can handle the dry, cold climate, the bristlecones face little competition. Unlike most plants, they tolerate dolomite soil, which is composed of a chalky type of limestone that is heavily alkaline and low in nutrients. As for insect threats, bristlecone wood is so dense that mountain-pine beetles and other pests can rarely burrow their way into it.

Empires rose and fell; wars raged; people were enslaved and freed; and the tree from 2500 B.C. continued its implacable slow-motion existence, adding about two-hundredths of an inch to the diameter of its trunk each year. Minute changes in the tree-ring record make bristlecones an exceptionally useful source of data about changing conditions on earth. When rains are heavier than normal, the rings widen. When volcanic eruptions cause global cooling, frost rings make the anomaly visible. The precision of these records means that bristlecones have periodically butted into other disciplines: geology, archeology, climatology. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the trees contributed to the upending of the canonical theory that Bronze Age civilization had spread westward from Egypt and the Near East. Bristlecones have also affected modern political discourse: the famous "hockey stick graph," which two decades ago raised awareness of human-driven global warming, relied on bristlecone data.



As the millennia go by, bristlecones become contorted and wraithlike. The main stem, or leader, dies back. Entire branches, even the trunk itself, become fossils. At first glance, the tree may look dead. Such is the case of the forty-five-hundred-year-old tree that clings to life near the tourist path that now runs through the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest. Spears of dead wood jut into the air. The trunk is a marbled hulk stripped of bark, like driftwood thrown from a vanished ocean. A ribbon of live bark runs up one side, funnelling water and nutrients to clumps of green needles high above. All told, the tree is an unprepossessing specimen; most people march past it without giving it a second glance. When I sat by the tree for an hour last July, the only visitor who took any notice of it was a dog named Dougie, who briefly sniffed the trunk and then darted away.

In 1957, Edmund Schulman, a researcher from the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, in Tucson, determined that this eccentric senior was older than any other tree on earth which had been dated. He named it Methuselah. The next year, when the United States Forest Service established the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, Methuselah bore an identifying marker. The sign was soon removed, however, because tourists were extracting souvenirs. The tree's location is now known only to scientists, forest rangers, and a few enthusiasts. This anonymity is just as well, since there are almost certainly Great Basin bristlecones that are yet older. A nearby tree appears to have been born about three hundred years earlier. Even more ancient trees are rumored to exist elsewhere in the Whites.

What is most astonishing about *Pinus longaeva* is not the age of any single organism but the collective oldness and otherness of its entire community. No two super-elderly trees look alike, to the point where they have acquired the characteristics of individuals. Trees are prone to anthropomorphism; we project our dreams and our anxieties onto them. Bristlecones have been called elders, sentinels, sages. The possibility that climate change will cause their extinction has inspired a spate of alarmed news stories, although tree scientists tend to discount the idea that the bristlecones are in immediate danger. They have survived any number of catastrophes in the past; they may survive humanity.

"Look, if you want me to intuit and empathize with your feelings, just tell me what they are and how to react to them!"

"Hope you've read up on the curse of the bristlecone," Andy Bunn told me, with mock concern, over breakfast at a diner in Bishop, California. We were joined by Matt Salzer, a veteran researcher from the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research. Bunn, who teaches environmental science at Western Washington University, in Bellingham, has been working with bristlecones since 2006. "People who get too close to these trees die young," he explained. Edmund Schulman, the man who discovered Methuselah, died, of a stroke, at the age of forty-nine. Bunn went on, "Matt here has a slab of the Currey Tree"—another well-known specimen—"in his office. He handles it with abandon, as if it won't kill him."

Salzer sighed. "Yeah, the curse," he said. "Always thought it was stupid. Had second thoughts when I had to get that stent put in."

They laughed and dug into their breakfast. Both come from academic families on the East Coast: Bunn, who is forty-eight, is the son of a distinguished hematologist at Harvard Medical School; Salzer, who is fifty-eight, grew up in Buffalo, the son of an education professor. Bunn and Salzer now affect the outdoorsy aesthetic of eastern California: flannel shirts, vests, cargo pants.

It was mid-September, California fire season, and the diner was crowded with firefighters on call. Bishop is the largest town in Owens Valley, which lies between the Sierra Nevada and the White Mountains. The Sierras loom dramatically over the plain, their gray granite peaks etched in the sun. The Whites present a less impressive appearance from afar. Although they rise more than fourteen thousand feet, almost as high as the Sierras, they are smoother and more rounded, their slopes an unphotogenic beige. The bristlecone zone lies at an elevation of between nine and eleven thousand feet.

Bunn and Salzer had come to the Whites to lay the groundwork for a study of very old bristlecone wood. Bunn is keenly interested in tracking climate change through bristlecone data. Salzer has long wanted to fill out a comprehensive chronology of bristlecone tree rings, carrying on work that began at the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research in the mid-twentieth century. After breakfast, we drove up a narrow, twisting road leading into the Whites. Upon picking a camping spot, we headed to the chief attraction of the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest: the Schulman Grove. It includes Methuselah, and was named for Edmund Schulman.

Bunn, the more loquacious of the pair, said, "What is the oldest tree? It's trivia. Matt and I don't find it that interesting. It's unanswerable. A lot of these trees have been dated; a whole lot haven't." He paused. "Of course, I get a chill from standing next to something that's been living in the same place for five thousand years. We can't begin to comprehend the mechanisms of birth and death on that scale."

Salzer grunted assent: "Yeah, there's a lot that's unknown." Soft-spoken and laconic, he tends to wait several long seconds before answering questions, and then says something on the order of "Possibly," "Not necessarily," or "Unclear."

At the Schulman Grove, Bunn and Salzer met up with a group of European researchers. Tom De Mil, of Ghent University, was experimenting with making CT scans of tree-ring samples. He hoped that mapping differences in the density of the wood would yield an even more precise record of moisture and temperature variations from year to year. Jesper Björklund and

Bristlecone pines thrive at high elevations and live for thousands of years.

Kristina Seftigen, who work in the Forest Dynamics department of the Swiss Federal Research Institute, had developed sophisticated new models for extracting historical climate data from tree-ring cells.

We all began walking the tourist path, and the slope rising to our left presented a typical bristlecone habitat: trees more or less evenly spaced, with the bright-tan hulks of dead trees intervening. It looked less like a forest than like a poorly managed orchard. But dark-green junior bristlecones, on all sides of us, confirmed the general health of the population.

Bunn stepped over an exposed root and said, “You see the roots going all over the place—above ground, below ground. They’ll often go uphill. They find the cracks in the substrate, work their way into it.”

Salzer added, “There’ll be a period of time in spring when snow will melt during the day, giving all the trees a drink, then freeze up at night and melt again the next day. It’s like a watering system, until the snow is gone.”

De Mil picked up a remnant and pointed out a thin crack running through it. “Frost ring,” he said. “Is this one of the major events?”

Salzer looked, pondered, and said, “Could be.”

When a significant volcanic eruption occurs, the volume of matter and dust ejected into the atmosphere can obscure the sun and cause a worldwide cooling; at such times, freezing temperatures arrive unseasonably early, when cells in a new layer of wood are still forming. The resulting damage to the cells causes a break in the usual succession of rings—a frost ring.

“A few events are so severe that they show up in every tree,” Salzer said. “2036 B.C., 43 B.C., 627 A.D.” He went on, “2036 B.C. is maybe my favorite. It’s also my bane, because there is hardly any wood left that has intact rings on either side of that date. The wood fractures, and erosion sets in.”

Bunn noted, “These volcanic events have been linked to disruptions of early civilizations, like Akkad, the world’s first empire. The poem ‘The Curse of Akkad’ tells of how the harvests failed and the population starved. ‘People were flailing at themselves from hunger’—that kind of thing.”

“And 43 B.C., after the assassination of Caesar,” Salzer said. “People thought that the darkening of the skies was a message from the gods.” Julius Caesar died in 44 B.C. According to Plutarch, the sun was obscured for an entire year—“its orb rose pale and without radiance”—and fruits withered. Records of the Han dynasty, in China, indicate that in the same period the sun “was bluish white and cast no shadows.” The most commonly cited cause is a volcanic cloud emanating from Mt. Etna, in Sicily, although other eruptions have been proposed.

We stood for a moment looking at the trees. They did seem sentinel-like. Bunn touched a neighboring branch, which fell into an easy, swinging motion.

“Andy likes to feel the energy from the trees,” Salzer said, gently snickering. He was a bit of a bristlecone himself: deliberate, diffident, bemused.

We continued following the path, which traces a four-mile route through the forest. Bunn, equipped with a G.P.S. device, searched for a site, off the path, where five- or six-thousand-year-old remnants could be found. Salzer was on the lookout for Methuselah. After a brief search, he identified the tree, giving it a friendly pat.

Two husky, weathered Welshmen happened along—one dressed all in black, including a black leather cap, and the other wearing a red flannel shirt. "You lot look like experts," one of them said. "Do you know which is Methuselah?"

"Turn around," Bunn said.

The Welshmen looked and laughed. "*This*?" they said.

The University of Arizona's Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, where secrets of the bristlecone reside, was founded in 1937. For decades, it occupied a warren of rooms and corridors beneath a football stadium. Since 2013, the lab has been housed in a handsome building with an exterior of hanging metal columns, giving it the look of an abstract forest. Inside, researchers have access to a kind of arboreal Library of Congress: a vast collection of tree fragments from around the world, including cross-sections of giant sequoias. The lab is affixing each with a bar code, so that researchers can check out samples.

The lab was the brainchild of Andrew Ellicott Douglass, an astronomer who, in 1904, began collecting tree samples in the West, convinced that variations in ring width could reveal cycles of solar activity. His research remained inconclusive, but along the way he essentially founded dendrochronology, the science of tree-ring dating. His greatest insight was to recognize patterns among the hundreds of samples he gathered in Arizona: rings on the trees were wider in 1884 and 1885, narrower in 1851, and so on. Using a giant-sequoia stump as a reference, Douglass meticulously built up a tree-ring chronology, reaching back to around 1300 B.C. Stray fragments of wood could be matched to the master index. Douglass employed this system to develop fairly exact dates for Aztec and Ancestral Puebloan ruins in the American Southwest.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the giant sequoias, which grow only on the western slopes of the Sierras, were widely assumed to be the world's oldest trees. They were certainly the biggest: the General Sherman Tree, in Sequoia National Park, is the most voluminous on earth. (In the late nineteenth century, it was known as the Karl Marx Tree, because a leftist commune occupied the area.) Bristlecones, by comparison, seemed to be mere oddities. John Muir, the pioneering naturalist, described them as "irrepressibly and extravagantly picturesque." Then, in the nineteen-forties, a Forest Service ranger named Al Noren counted the rings on bristlecones and began to suspect their true age. Word reached Edmund Schulman, Douglass's second-in-command.

Schulman first visited the Whites in 1953 and discovered Methuselah four years later. He dated the trees with a time-tested method: using a coring device to bore in and extract a very thin sample. The process causes mature trees no harm. The naked eye can glean little from a core; you need a microscope to see the rings clearly and pinpoint differences. Schulman wrote an overview of his work for *National Geographic*, titling it "Bristlecone Pine, Oldest Known Living Thing." He died just before the issue was published.

Chatter about a "bristlecone curse" started after the tragic demise of the so-called Prometheus Tree, which Salzer prefers to call the Currey Tree. In 1964, a graduate student named Donald Currey was attempting to date a huge bristlecone on Wheeler Peak, in the Snake Range, in Nevada. Currey first tried to take a core, but he had trouble getting a good sample. With the permission of the Forest Service, he decided to cut down the entire tree. A crew showed up with a chain saw, but when the foreman touched Prometheus he reportedly said, "I'm not cutting this tree." The next day, another crew did the deed. Currey concluded that the tree was forty-nine hundred years old—slightly older than the bristlecones Schulman had studied in the Whites. Currey had to live with the reputation of having, in the words of one writer-activist, "casually killed (yes, murdered!)" the world's oldest tree. A year after Prometheus was felled, a young Forest Service employee suffered a fatal heart attack while attempting to remove a slab.

Five years ago, the Los Angeles-based artist Jeff Weiss organized a memorial service for Prometheus, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its death. Matt Salzer, despite his resistance to mythologizing bristlecones, recorded a speech for the gathering. He spoke of how remnants of bristlecones, including the detritus of Prometheus, reveal how climate has changed in the past and how it might change in the future. He said, "It is almost as if the trees are speaking the words of the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who once wrote, 'I have heard many years of telling, / And many years should see some change.' "

Some of the bones of Prometheus are squirrelled away in Salzer's office in Tucson. When I stopped by, not long after our trip to the White Mountains, several slabs were resting next to a filing cabinet. Salzer arranged them end to end, forming a six-foot radius. He rummaged around for more bristlecone relics, and found a remnant with a ring marked "43 B.C."—the frost ring that followed Caesar's death.

We also looked at three cores from Methuselah and four from a tree that Salzer calls Harlan's Secret Tree, for Tom Harlan, a dendrochronologist who began working at the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research in 1957. Some years after Schulman's death, Harlan examined his predecessor's stock of cores and realized that one tree was even older than Methuselah. Salzer provisionally estimates, based on Harlan's core samples, that the tree is 4,817 years old. He would like to verify that figure, but he's not sure precisely where Harlan's Secret Tree is. Harlan died in 2013, and did not record its location. There is a clue, though, in the form of a page from Edmund Schulman's original 1957 notes.

Salzer hopes to resolve the matter, if only to satisfy periodic calls from Guinness World Records. But he is more excited by the possibility of filling in the remaining gaps in the master bristlecone chronology, which extends back ten thousand years. In addition, he is exploring the complex relationship between bristlecone rings and radiocarbon dating. His partner on the project is Charlotte Pearson, a forty-three-year-old British archeologist, who took up dendrochronology because she was fascinated by its potential implications for the history of ancient civilizations.

Pearson stopped by Salzer's office to discuss their collaboration. "What we want to do is get the best possible calibration," she said. "Make it high-resolution. Many people tend to think that a radiocarbon curve is set in stone—that once you get a date you can trust in it completely. But the curve has been revised many times, and the bristlecones have been crucial to that process."

Radiocarbon is an isotope of carbon that is generated in the earth's atmosphere by cosmic radiation. All living things consume small quantities of the isotope as they take in carbon dioxide. When they die, the radiocarbon in their remains steadily decays. In 1949, the chemist Willard Libby announced a remarkable discovery: the age of any organic remnant can be determined by measuring the level of radiocarbon against what a living thing typically maintains. In a stroke, radiocarbon allowed for a comprehensive dating of relics from human civilization and biological history.

Libby, who won a Nobel Prize for his work, was aware that his model relied on an untested assumption—that the level of radiocarbon in the atmosphere remains constant. In the sixties, the Austrian-born geophysicist Hans Suess took radiocarbon data from some very old bristlecone samples, knowing that ring-counting had established their age precisely. The radiocarbon-dating estimate was way off, giving the impression that the samples were many hundreds of years younger than they were. Suess concluded that levels of radiocarbon had been considerably higher five or six thousand years ago, perhaps because of increased solar activity or shifts in the earth's magnetic field. As a result, archeological dates in the period between 4000 and 2000 B.C. had to be drastically revised. The recalibration was especially dramatic in the case of Neolithic ruins in remote parts of Western Europe, for which no other historical documentation existed. These sites were assumed to have postdated the Bronze Age architecture of Mesopotamia and Egypt; instead, they came first.

The bristlecones weren't done with their meddling. In 2018, Pearson, Salzer, and others published a paper in which they tried out a new approach. Prior research had calibrated the curve on a decade-to-decade basis; Pearson and Salzer broke it down year by year. It was time-consuming work, and they limited their study to the period from 1700 to 1500 B.C. These dates were not chosen at random: Pearson had long been obsessed with the giant volcanic eruption that took place on the island of Thera, in the Santorini archipelago. It was initially thought, on the basis of historical records, that the Thera event had contributed to the fall of the Minoan civilization, but radiocarbon dating of an olive branch placed the eruption several decades earlier, at a time when the Minoans were thriving. Pearson and Salzer believe that the date of the eruption should be moved forward. A bristlecone frost ring from 1560 B.C. is now considered to be a strong candidate for the temporal marker of the Thera cataclysm.

Pearson said of the Thera revision, "This is from only two hundred years of our proposed ten-thousand-year annual chronology. We expect more surprises. For example, there's the business of Miyake Events." In 2012, a solar scientist named Fusa Miyake used tree rings to pinpoint an enormous jump in radiocarbon, from 774 to 775 A.D. It appears to have been a huge solar event.

Salzer fingered one of the cores of Methuselah, which were still on his desk. "The event didn't do any apparent harm to the trees or anything else," he said. "No frost rings or anything

THE LADDER

The past, a dust-covered shoebox recovered
from my mother's attic, does not open easily.

Webs of duct tape, the ladder one must climb
into the unfinished attic, hot as a coffin—

going up the light bulb shatters
against my skull and the shadows deepen.

But in the end it yields, and photographs spill
across the kitchen table like playing cards.

She in her beautiful wedding dress,
my father in the uniform of youth.

There I am, with a cap gun and cowboy hat
on Christmas morning some geologic age ago.

Further in, deeper down
to the antique black-and-white images,

yellow-margined, crimped with age,
backed with carefully pencilled notes:

my grandmother beside the cottage in Donegal;
my grandfather, newly arrived in America,

on a New York City rooftop with two friends
nobody remembers the names of.

Donegal—that green archaism—
and Manhattan in the nineteen-thirties, polyglot dynamo,

all that was great about the twentieth century
fermenting in its democratic casks.

And there, in a battered Irish tintype,
is my great-grandmother, Margaret McGuire.

I've never seen her before.
I've never even thought to imagine her.

Widowed young, turned away
by her husband's impoverished people,

with three daughters to raise
and only the needlework to keep them,

monogrammed handkerchiefs
and lace-edged linen tablecloths, a life

beyond my powers of narrative comprehension,
notations I cannot translate from ancient script.

Donegal derives from the Irish *Dún na nGall*,
Dún meaning fort or tower or castle,

and *nGall* meaning foreigner, outlander, stranger,
in memory of the conquerors who occupied it.

The Castle of the Stranger.
Which is another name for the past.

—*Campbell McGrath*

like that. But people are very interested in the mechanics of such events today, because if one happened tomorrow—" He made a "Kablooey!" gesture in the direction of his computer.

I asked Salzer how scientists in other disciplines had reacted to periodic disruptions from the bristlecone community.

"Well, in the sixties one Old World archeologist said something like: 'Why should we be concerned with what's happening with some shrub in California?' But with our Thera paper the archeologists seemed pretty happy. These new dates were a better fit with what they'd suspected all along."

Like the Ents, in "The Lord of the Rings," the bristlecones seem to be imparting information slowly, on their own time.

"Something that began growing at the time of the Pyramids has a right to say stuff," Pearson said. "It gets to comment."

The oldest bristlecones in the White Mountains live in a lower-altitude ravine on a north-facing slope. At higher altitudes, the trees thin out as they get near an exposed ridge. A few lone trees, usually younger, stand ahead of the pack, like scouts. They make you wonder about the bristlecones' future. Are they creeping up the slopes, in reaction to a warming earth?

The matter of whether the trees record anthropogenic change was once the subject of furious debate. In 1998, the climatologist Michael E. Mann published the "hockey stick graph," showing a steep rise in global mean temperature from about 1850 onward. Mann's paper was co-authored by Malcolm Hughes, a senior researcher at the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, and depended heavily on bristlecone chronologies. Scientists, however, knew that bristlecones at lower altitudes were a less reliable index of temperature fluctuation: it was only on the exposed upper edge of the tree line that the trees were highly sensitive to a blast of cold, and more likely to develop frost rings and other markers of extremity. Climate-change deniers claimed fraud and spoke darkly of a "bristlecones addiction." Subsequent papers by Hughes, Salzer, and others refined the models, focussing on the upper-tree-line samples. The new models, together with an avalanche of data from other sources, confirm the hockey-stick upswing.

Bristlecones have been through hot spells before. Circa 4000 B.C., during the mid-Holocene period, the earth was about one degree Celsius warmer than it is today. But it is on track to get hotter than that. What happens when the bristlecones move up so far that they run out of space? A 2007 paper by the geologist Christopher Van de Ven paints a bleak picture. If the earth were to warm by two degrees, the Schulman Grove would die off. At six degrees, bristlecones would be confined to the highest slopes of White Mountain Peak. In such a scenario, that would be the least of our problems: a six-degree warming would be catastrophic in countless other ways.

On a midsummer trip to the Whites, I met up with Brian Smithers, a forty-three-year-old ecologist from Montana State University, in Bozeman. He is a rising star of bristlecone studies, and not uncontroversial. He grew up in a small town in the Sierras and turned to the natural sciences after abandoning plans of becoming an astronaut. A trim athlete who competes in triathlons, he was accepted into the U.S. Air Force Academy, but decided not to go when he realized that he might have to kill people. Instead, he served in the Peace Corps in Fiji. When he returned home, he became an ornithologist; in the past decade, he has shifted to tree science.

I met Smithers while he was organizing a summertime survey by an organization known as GLORIA Great

Basin. It is part of a worldwide network of GLORIA groups—Global Observation Research Initiative in Alpine Environments—which study how alpine species respond to climate change. Several dozen volunteers—ecologists, botanists, amateur enthusiasts—scoured high-elevation sites in the Whites, counting small alpine plants in gridded-off areas. I tagged along, though I could barely follow the conversation, which was conducted largely in Latin: "Is this *Trisetum spicatum*? That *Oxytropis* is a real cutie."

Smithers took part of a day off to show me a site where he had done a study comparing bristlecone populations with those of the limber pine, another hardy species that grows at high altitudes. He and other researchers had noted that in this area the limber pines appeared to be outpacing the bristlecones in moving to higher elevations—"leap-frogging" over them. His paper, published in 2017, attracted media attention, resulting in headlines like: "ANCIENT BRISTLECONE PINE FORESTS ARE BEING OVERWHELMED BY CLIMATE CHANGE" (the Los Angeles *Times*) and "CLIMATE CHANGE COULD KILL THE WORLD'S OLDEST TREES" (*Live Science*).

"It got away from me a little bit," Smithers said, as we trudged across a rock-strewn meadow toward a distant ridge. "It's hard to make a complex point in limited space. I was talking about some local populations where bristlecones were in trouble. The problem is that we can't begin to observe change at the rate these trees are accustomed to. At the moment, these limber pines appear to be charging up the slope. But maybe they will all die in fifty years, and maybe that's when bristlecones will move in."

We reached a ridge where dead bristlecones were scattered about in large numbers—a "relict grove." Trunks and branches protruded into the air, their surfaces polished and smooth to the touch. Small fragments with grayish, scoured wood lay in the low brush. "Something happened here," Smithers said. "These were really old trees that lived through a lot of really crappy conditions. There's no sign of a fire. No sign of insects. So what killed them?"

On the other side of the ridge, bristlecones reappeared. "Check out this one," Smithers said, pointing to an apparently long-dead hunk of a tree. It looked as though it had been blown over in a storm, but tufts of green needles emerged from a branch on one side. A vein of live bark snaked around the dead trunk and disappeared into the ground. It was like a vine growing on a ruin, except that the ruin was itself.

We headed back to the Crooked Creek Station, a handsome, spartan pine-log facility where the GLORIA group was based for the week. Part of the complex had once stood in downtown Los Angeles, housing the Starlight Bar and Grill. In the late eighties, the University of California at Davis dismantled the structures and hauled them up into the Whites. Before Crooked Creek became a research station, in 1978, it had been a U.S. Navy outpost, where research was conducted into the physiological effects of high-altitude exposure. Reportedly, harbor seals were brought to a pond near the site—to what end one dare not imagine.

Dinner was served in the high-ceilinged common room at Crooked Creek. In the group was Connie Millar, a revered ecologist who has long worked for the Forest Service and who is responsible for launching GLORIA in North America. She has been studying the effects of climate change for decades, with the Great Basin as her favorite site of observation. She worked on bristlecones for years but has added other subjects of study, including the pika, an adorable rabbit-like mammal that thrives in mountain zones.

"I'm actually not too worried about the bristlecones," Millar told me. "Schulman talked about 'longevity through adversity,' and there's something to that. You can't look only at the upper tree line. Contrary to what the Van de Ven model suggests, trees are still growing at lower elevations, sometimes even below the current tree lines. You have to be aware of all these microclimates where temperature and moisture can vary in unexpected ways.

THE WOMAN WITHOUT
A CORE
R. Chr

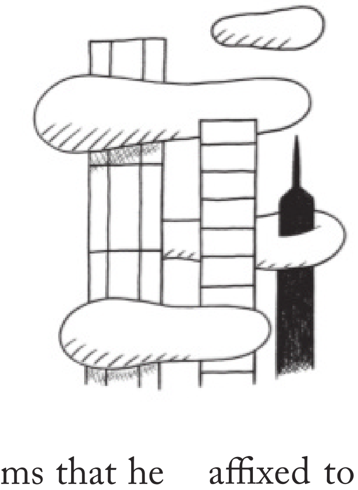
All through the Great Basin you see this kind of endurance. I see it in the pikas, too. They make their habitats in the talus"—the pile of rocky debris at the base of a slope or cliff—"and they find a mode of circulation almost decoupled from the outside. They hole up in their little air-conditioned homes."

Yet Millar is hardly sanguine about environmental threats to the trees. She told me that a colleague, Barbara Bentz, had recently found worrisome evidence of mountain-pine beetles killing bristlecones on Telescope Peak, in Death Valley. Such an invasion was previously thought to be impossible, because of the toughness of the tree's wood. Whatever the fate of the bristlecones, she noted, the general global trends are catastrophic. "The bristlecones live in their own world," she said. "Their longevity seems to be related in mysterious ways to the length of time dead wood stays in the environment. It's hard to generalize from that."

Humans tend to make a cult of trees. Many ancient traditions posit the existence of a primal tree that embodies eternal life. Reverence surrounds the Bodhi Tree, in Bodh Gaya, India; the Cypress of Abarkuh, in Iran; the Hibakujumoku trees, in Hiroshima, which withstood the atomic blast. There are trees of life, and trees of death. In Schubert's song "Der Lindenbaum," from the death-haunted cycle "Winterreise," a linden tree calls to a disconsolate wanderer, "Come to me, friend, / Here you will find rest." Thomas Mann makes much of that song in "The Magic Mountain," finding it symbolic of a civilization hurtling toward its own destruction.

The bristlecone cult is varied and intense. Artists tease ghostlike figures from their writhing shapes. Creationists have tried to reconcile the bristlecones with a putative cosmological starting date of 4004 B.C. (Methuselah fits their chronology, but the older remnants have to be discarded.) The Long Now Foundation, a futuristic organization based in San Francisco, bought land in the area of Mount Washington, Nevada, in large part because it contained bristlecone pines. Jeff Bezos, a member, is funding the construction of a clock, in a mountain in Texas, that will tick for ten thousand years. Long Now hopes to erect a similar clock on Mt. Washington.

Tree worship can fall prey to political exploitation, especially when a national or ethnic group claims an immemorial attachment to a patch of land. Jared Farmer, in his 2013 book, "Trees in Paradise: A California History," notes that California's sequoias and redwoods were long lauded as emblems of American greatness. Madison Grant, one of the founders of the Save the Redwoods League, was a racist and a eugenicist, notorious for the best-selling 1916 tract "The Passing of the Great Race." Grant extolled the giant trees in much the same terms that he applied to sturdy specimens of Nordic supremacy. The age of the trees allowed for a kind of backdating of Manifest Destiny, into the mists of prehistory.



Bristlecones can't be monumentalized in the same way. They have the look of survivors, not conquerors. Fittingly, they found fame during the Cold War, when atomic tests were taking place not far off, in the Nevada desert. Bristlecones are post-apocalyptic trees, sci-fi trees. They can be seen as symbols of our own precarious future. Michael P. Cohen, in his 1998 book, "A Garden of Bristlecones," deftly anatomizes this latter-day bristlecone mythology, writing that the trees "always reveal the motives of their observers."

My own bristlecone obsession is probably rooted in a fixation on extremely old people and things. Some of my favorite music was written centuries ago. When I was a teen-ager, I spent a summer wandering the Highlands and islands of Scotland, looking at Neolithic ruins as old as Methuselah. Meeting people with long memories gives me an elemental thrill. In 1990, when I was in college, I spoke on the phone to the Russian-born musical polymath Nicolas Slonimsky, who recalled walking the streets of Petrograd on the first day of the Bolshevik Revolution. "I saw nothing, and went back to practicing the piano," he said.

In November, just before the first snows shut down access to the Whites, I made a final trip to the Schulman Grove. The question of the oldest tree nagged at me. Salzer had shown me the notebook page in which the location of Harlan's Secret Tree is indicated—somewhat opaquely. As on a treasure map, one is told to walk a certain distance and in a certain direction. Salzer and Bunn had followed the instructions and texted me a picture of a likely candidate. Next summer, Salzer plans to take a core sample and resolve the issue.

When I reached the site, I became convinced that a neighboring tree was a better match for Schulman's vague description. I basked for a while in the aura of this nameless ancient. Then I found a metal I.D. plate affixed to one of its roots. Checking the number against documentation in my notes, I was disappointed to find that the tree was only three thousand years old. I went back to Salzer's tree, which had no visible tag. It was a heftier, healthier-looking specimen than Methuselah. The boughs were a vivid green and soft to the touch. Red-purple pollen cores were forming at many of the tips.

Was this it? Did it matter? I remembered a conversation that I'd had with Tim Forsell, who manages the Crooked Creek Station in the summers. He said, "It's so arrogant to think that we stumbled in there and happened to find the world's oldest tree. Harlan always said there were older ones. I once asked him, 'If these trees can be five thousand years old, could there be six-thousand-year-old trees?' And he answered, 'Absolutely.'"

By the time I headed back, night was falling. Light fades fast in the mountains, and I walked the last mile to the parking lot in near-darkness. But then a full moon rose, and the dolomite on neighboring slopes began to glow eerily bright, like phantom drifts of snow. The wind picked up and elicited a low, full *whoosh* from bristlecone branches, which swung to and fro without creaking or rustling. When the wind stopped, the forest felt like a cavernous but soundproofed space—a silent concert hall, an empty cathedral. The moon lit up the mountains as I drove to the valley below. ♦

VISITOR

BRYAN WASHINGTON

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

He knocked on my door about a month after the funeral. I almost didn't answer, since I wasn't expecting my fuck buddy. It was entirely too late for anyone to be visiting, but the man in front of me said that he'd been a friend of my father's—and I slipped on the face I wore for those people. It was three or four in the morning. He'd caught a late flight from Kingston to Houston.

Then the man said something else, in a heavy patois. I asked him to repeat it.

His lover, this guy said, rubbing both of his elbows.

I made a new kind of face. Except it couldn't have been a new kind of face. We only get so many.

What, I said.

It's true, he said.

No, I said, and then I laughed.

The man asked to come in. He set his duffel on the carpet, and his jacket beside it, and the doorway was crammed, so we stood, and that's when I got a good look at him: mid-fifties, Asian. Short hair, messy and curly, sloped just below the nape of his neck. His boots were too large. His track pants were too tight. He told me that he'd never flown in a plane before.

The motor, he said, pantomiming the way the engine turned.

He made a circle with his finger, slowly, and then not very slowly at all.

•

A few hours later, I found him in the living room, sleeping on the rug. I'd made something like a bed on the sofa, out of some hoodies and a quilt my mom had given me. But I guess it hadn't worked out. He'd folded everything up and placed it on the coffee table.

Hey, I said, toeing him.

The man blinked himself awake, slowly.

Morning, he said. Wah gwan.

No, I said.

No?

No. You got a free night out of me. So tell me who you really are.

I told you, the man said.

You lied, I said.

That's when my visitor sat up, cocking his head at me. He scratched it, mussing his hair even further.

You look just like him, he said.

Stop that, I said.

But you do.

Look, guy.

Completely uncanny, the man said, still scratching, yawning, shaking his ass a little bit.

He stood, arching his back, leaning one way and then the other. We were about the same height.

But you're chubbier, the man said.

Hey, I said.

It's true, he said. Your father could never hold any weight.

The man sat and crossed his legs, slumping with an elbow on the sofa cushion. When he started to yawn, I braced myself, biting my gums, but I couldn't help it—I yawned, too.

•

The man didn't want me to take him to breakfast, but I'd stopped keeping groceries in the apartment. Everything always rotted.

I drove him to this Jewish deli a few blocks up the road. I'd been living in Bellaire for the past while, just west of the city proper, where it's all Vietnamese coffee shops and Chinese markets and Venezuelan grocery stores and there are loan sharks posted on every corner. No one looks like anyone else, until you drive twenty minutes east, toward midtown, and then everyone's white. My visitor set his ear on the window, and I thought he'd fallen asleep, until he burped and settled his elbows on the dashboard.

At the deli, he ordered one thing from the top of the menu, tentatively, scanning my face. Then he ordered a bagel and some eggs and some potatoes and three biscuits with grits, and also a small plate of lox. Our waiter—some whiteboy—made a funny face and looked from my visitor to me. He wore the same face as he brought our food to the table, juggling three plates with his elbows.

Sorry, my visitor said, when he came up for air. Haven't eaten.

That's fine, I said.

Been about a day.

No worries.

Two days.

You don't have to lie, I said.

You don't have to lie, the man said, grinning, in a voice four octaves higher.

Our waiter stopped by the table again. Lingering. I asked if there was a problem, and he shook his head and stepped away.

So you're from Jamaica, I said.

That's what I told you, the man said.

I opened my mouth, and then I closed it. My visitor tugged on his ear.

I know what's in your head, he said. Plenty of Chinese all over the island. Everywhere. Even if you didn't know that.

I didn't say there weren't, I said, although it's exactly what I'd been thinking.

Eh, the man said.

And then: Your father and I were just kids, he said. Lasted five years, on and off.

Five years, I said.

One, two, five.

And then you stopped?

Stopped? In Jamaica? Of course we stopped.

Did you stay in contact?

Ai-yah, the man said. How would we do that? We stopped. Do they have orange juice?

Maybe, I said. Fuck.

Your father swore, too, the man said.

Fuck, I said again.

Rude boy.

Stop that. How did you two even meet?

He worked in my mother's shop, the man said. At least in the beginning. Short walk from the schoolhouse.

And then what? You just hooked up?

Hooked up?

Never mind, I said. What did y'all do together? How did you two even know?

Know what?

You know what.

This prompted a smile from the man, between mouthfuls of eggs and jelly and bagel. He slid the plate toward me. I tore off a corner of a biscuit.

We just knew, he said. It was obvious. At least to us. Happened how it always happens and then it ended.

I watched this man eat. I tried to think of him with my father. I'd only thought of my dad in the context of my mother, whenever I thought of him at all. His death had felt abrupt—he'd got sick with a brand of illness no one comes back from—and none of our relatives had said much to me, about anything at all, in the years beforehand. We existed on separate planes of reality. But they'd shown out at the funeral. They'd handled all the arrangements. If anything, it seemed like another attempt to push me aside.

Why are you here, I said, and the man looked up.

He grinned again, widely. When he tugged at a napkin from across the table, nearly tipping over the holder, I passed him one of mine.

To meet *you*, he said. You're his son! He had a son!

•

I knew that my father was born in Jamaica. I knew that he'd lived on the coast. I knew that he'd left the island in his twenties. I knew that he'd met my mother in Toronto, and that they'd moved to New York, and then to Tampa, before tumbling over to Houston. I knew that my father didn't argue, he just made decisions. I knew that, when I was a kid, sometimes my mom would grab my hand, in the middle of the evening, and we'd go for walks around our suburb, leaving my father to himself. I knew that my father played soccer. I knew that he wasn't very good at it. I knew that the day I came out to him, after my mom died, he flipped over the kitchen table, and then a coffee table, and also the dresser sitting under the television. I knew that I slept in the park a few blocks away that night, until my father came looking for me in his pickup, and that when I woke up he was sleeping right next to me, hands tucked under his armpits. I knew that we drove up the road for kolaches the next morning. I knew that we chewed them, sitting across from each other, silent in the diner while high-school girls laughed and poked at their phones behind us. I knew that my father and I didn't talk much after that. I knew that, some days when I was a kid, my mother would look from me to him, shaking her head, smiling.

But I also knew that I couldn't discount my visitor's statements outright. He'd nailed his dates. His geography checked out. Everything was just true enough that I couldn't call bullshit.

•

My visitor had no itinerary beyond seeing my father's tombstone. His return flight wasn't for another five days. He had, apparently, booked the wrong morning to fly back to Jamaica.

Should've been a shorter trip, he said. Slip of the hand.

That's a pretty big fuckup, I said.

Everything worked out.

What if I'd been out of town? What if I'd told you to fuck off?

You weren't. You didn't.

At least not yet, I said.

You won't, the man said. Everything worked out.

That anyone could be this trusting seemed absurd to me, but my visitor was absurdity incarnate: sometimes, midspeech, he'd drift off and he wouldn't come back. He fingered the posters—maps of places I'll probably never go—in my apartment. He touched all the cups. He napped, and talked in his sleep, and then he woke up in conversation with himself, cheesing at the punch line.

•

When my visitor fell asleep, I slipped over to the fuck buddy's apartment. His name was Joel. He stopped me at the door with one kiss, and then another. Before I could say the thing that I came over to tell him, we were on his sofa, out of our hoodies, nearly out of our shorts.

Wait, I said.

You wait, Joel said.

Seriously, I said. I've got this guy staying with me.

This was enough for Joel to look up from what he was doing. His face made something like a smirk. His living room wasn't large, but it was warm, and from the center of it I could smell whatever he'd cooked for dinner—some kind of fish soup, probably, seasoned heavily enough to linger for days. Initially, I couldn't stand that smell. Now I daydreamed about it at work.

Joel blinked. Then he exhaled.

I don't mind, he said.

Good, I said.

Nobody said *we* were anything official, he said.

Correct, I said.

Are you at least being safe, Joel asked.

It's nothing like that, I said. Not a sex thing.

Then he's a roommate?

Hardly.

So it's just an everyday living-with-you-rent-free-with-no-sex thing.

He's a friend of my father's. Maybe more than a friend.

Joel leaned back on the sofa, crossing his arms. He was round, like me. When my father died, he was the first person I told. Joel grew up in Katy, out in the suburbs, and he came from money, through his parents' restaurant on Mason Road, until that restaurant caught on fire one night and both his parents died in it and Joel had to move in with his sister. The money went away.

Now he was a barista. We'd met at a Starbucks, after he fucked up my name. Among other things, Joel was extremely hard to shock.

He said, Did your mystery man say why he's showing up now?

No, I said.

Well, I said, maybe.

Maybe, Joel asked, or no?

He wants to get to know me, I think.

And how's that going?

It isn't.

Sounds about right.

Don't be a dick.

You won't let me, Joel said, brushing mine. Just think about it, he added. If he isn't lying, then this man came back from the dead, too.

I'd hardly call it that.

He came up from Jamaica, right? Where your dad's from?

Was from, I said.

Right, Joel said. So this dude basically split the universe.

That sounds dramatic.

Because it is. You should hear him out.

I am.

In your own way, I'm sure.

Before I could say anything to that, Joel set his head on my chest, hanging halfway off the sofa. Folded his arms into the creases of mine, and just lay there. And I shivered, just a bit, but I didn't get up or anything, and I shut my eyes, and it wasn't entirely unpleasant.

•

The next morning, my visitor asked me where I went when I left the apartment. I sat cross-legged on the sofa in sweatpants, watching him watch me inhale a bag of shrimp chips. I'd made it back home maybe thirty minutes earlier.

Work, I said. Where else?

Boss man, my visitor said. You have a degree?

Do I look like I have a degree?

Funny guy. How would I know what that looks like?

I went to community college for a while, I said. Shit was expensive. It didn't work out.

So you stopped?

It didn't work out, I said, and the man placed a hand on his chest, and began to hiccup.

What does that mean, he said. You have anything else to eat here?

No, I said. And it means that it didn't work out. Why the fuck do you care?

I'm just trying to figure you out, my visitor said, shrugging and smiling.

I work and I get paid. That's all you need to know.

There's more to life, the man said, and he reached for my chips.

Before I could lift the bag, he'd grabbed four, five, six, dropping crumbs all over the carpet.

•

The next day, I told Funke, one of my co-workers at the gas station, about my visitor. We were stacking columns of gum on a shelf, or I was stacking them while she stood beside me, texting.

The man had started folding my clothes, rearranging everything in the drawers. Whenever I left the apartment, he'd stare at my face beforehand, squinting, while I tied my shoes. A layer of fuzz had made its way around his chin.

Bring back some food, he'd said that morning. You hear?

Excuse me? I said. Who the fuck are you talking to?

Fresh food, my visitor said. Something from the earth. Natural.

When I told Funke all this, she made a face.

What's the problem, she said. You don't believe him?

I don't know. It's not like I can ask anyone in my family about this. They wouldn't fucking know.

Well, Funke said.

Right.

Does he have any reason to lie?

Not really. Can you hold these?

Wait a minute, Funke said. I'm talking with my son.

How's he doing?

Don't worry about him. I already tried introducing you.

Fine, I said.

You thought I forgot, Funke said.

I get it. Jesus.

Tell me more about your dead daddy's boyfriend.

It's too soon for you to say that shit.

Wrong, Funke said. Time moves whether we want it to or not.

Fine, I said. This guy knows too much. I guess it's possible that he's not bullshitting.

Stupid, Funke said. Of course it's *possible*. We all live many lives.

She glanced up from her phone while I juggled some Trident. She started to hand me the boxes I'd dropped, and then she dropped them, too.

I don't know, I said.

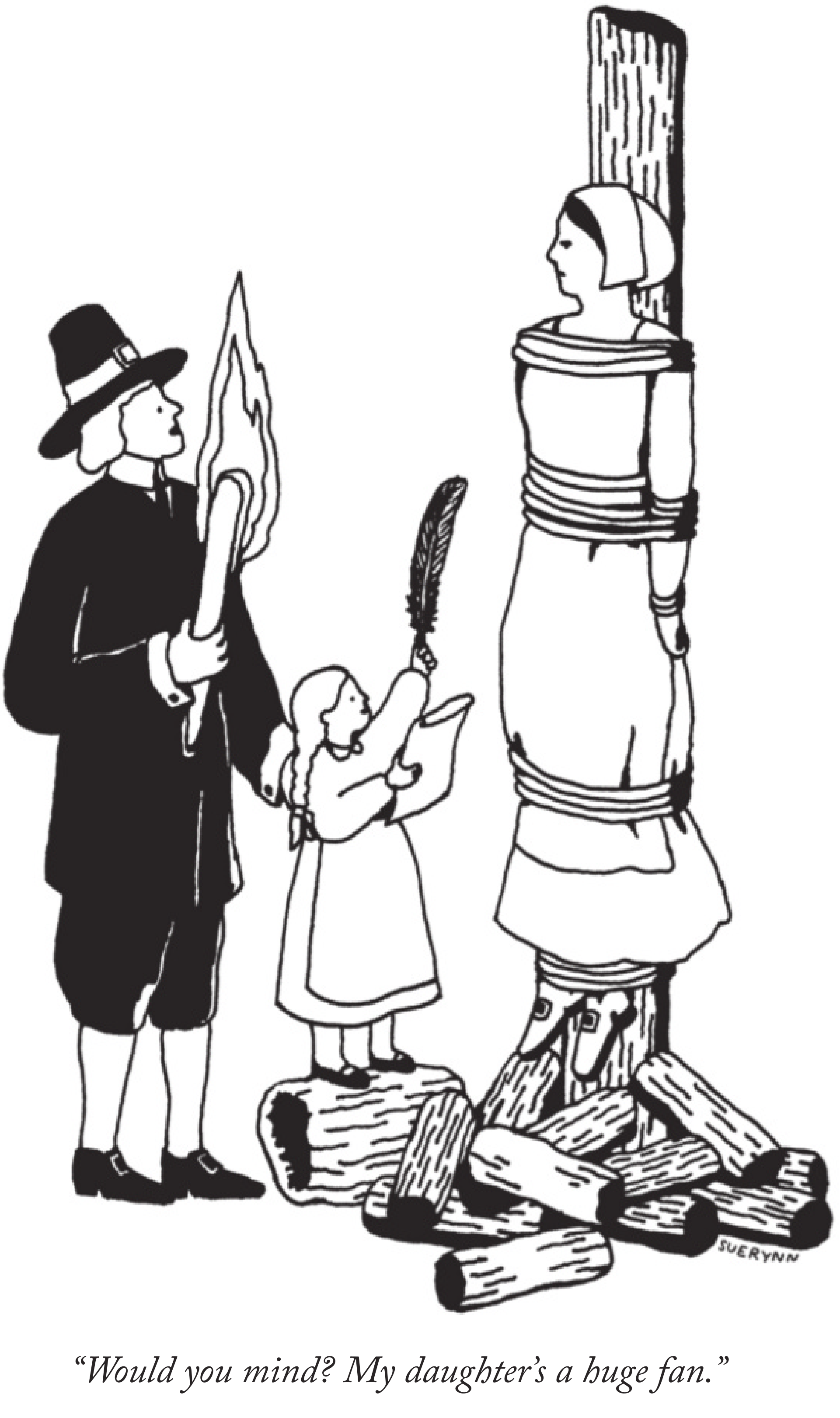
That's the thing, Funke said. You don't have to know.

Knowing is a *privilege*, she said. The best we can do is brace ourselves.

•

My visitor stood over my stove with the groceries I'd bought from the H Mart down the road. He sautéed bell peppers, lightly fried a slab of mackerel, stirred garlic in a pot I'd never seen before. He poured the marinade of garlic and peppers over the fish, dousing everything with red pepper, and slipped the mass from the pan to a bright-blue plate, beside stir-fried spinach and rice.

We ate on the floor, picking at everything with plastic forks. I watched my visitor stuff his face, while buried



"Would you mind? My daughter's a huge fan."

in one of my oversized flannel shirts.

Your father hated reggae, the man said. He only ever listened to Bob Dylan.

(This was true.)

Your father couldn't cook a lick, the man said. But he loved to eat.

(This was true.)

Your father didn't have a favorite color.

Bullshit, I said. Everyone has a favorite color.

Everyone but your father, the man said. Although he hated purple.

•

My family flew to Jamaica only once. I was eight, I think, and I spent most of the trip holding my stomach. Everything was too hot for me. Everything tasted too wild. Too fresh. Eventually, my mother and I settled into a circuit between our hotel and a McDonald's, while my father disappeared for hours at a time, meeting us in the lobby after the sun set.

I sat with my mom by the concierge. She read on the floor beside me, my head in her lap.

Once, I asked her where my father went. She looked at me, and closed her book.

After enough time had passed that I'd forgotten the question, she said, Home.

And he can't take us with him?

There's nothing for you to see there.

But I want to see *him*.

I know, my mom said. But his family does, too.

Why can't they come here?

Mmm, my mom said. He's coming back, she said, rubbing my stomach, and then my neck. He's gone, my mom said, but he'll be back.

And she was right. When my father came back to the hotel, he beamed. That smile didn't dim until we'd been back in the States for a couple of months, and then it went out entirely. I never really saw it again.

•

My visitor wanted to see things.

Everything your father saw, he said. The things he liked.

Impossible, I said.

You're his son. If you don't know, then who does?

So we drove to the Menil. We drove to Buc-ee's. We walked through the Rothko Chapel. We drove to the Children's Museum. We drove up and down Chinatown. We drove to a fish fry on Scott Street, where my visitor got an upset stomach, and I called him a little bitch, until my stomach imploded, too. We made a pit stop at a coffee shop in Montrose, and watched the young men in high heels and trenchcoats order almond lattes. When I asked my visitor if he wanted to see NASA, his eyes lit up, but he declined.

I'd have a heart attack, he said. I'd join your father.

That isn't funny, I said.

No, he said. You're right. Everyone dies. We all go.

Then stop fucking laughing, I said.

I'm sorry, my visitor said.

No, you're not.

No, I'm not.

But by then I was cracking up, too.

•

Joel and I rarely went out in the world together: I could count the number of times, in two years, on two hands. Once to the CVS behind his place, for lube. Another time to wash his car. A third time for sesame seeds at H-E-B. Once again to the Thai Spice, down the road. Mostly, we were in his apartment: eating or fucking or lying around.

I told him about my customers at the gas station, piss drunk or courteous or stoned beyond all recall. Joel told me about his own customers, inconsolable before caffeine and approachable afterward. Sometimes we watched horror movies. We never finished any of them. Neither of us ever really questioned our routine.

Also: Joel collected facts. Impractical shit that neither of us could use. When I asked him why, Joel blinked and said, Because facts are things that cannot be changed. Facts can't be taken away.

So when, one night, he asked if I'd like to go for a walk, all I could do was stare.

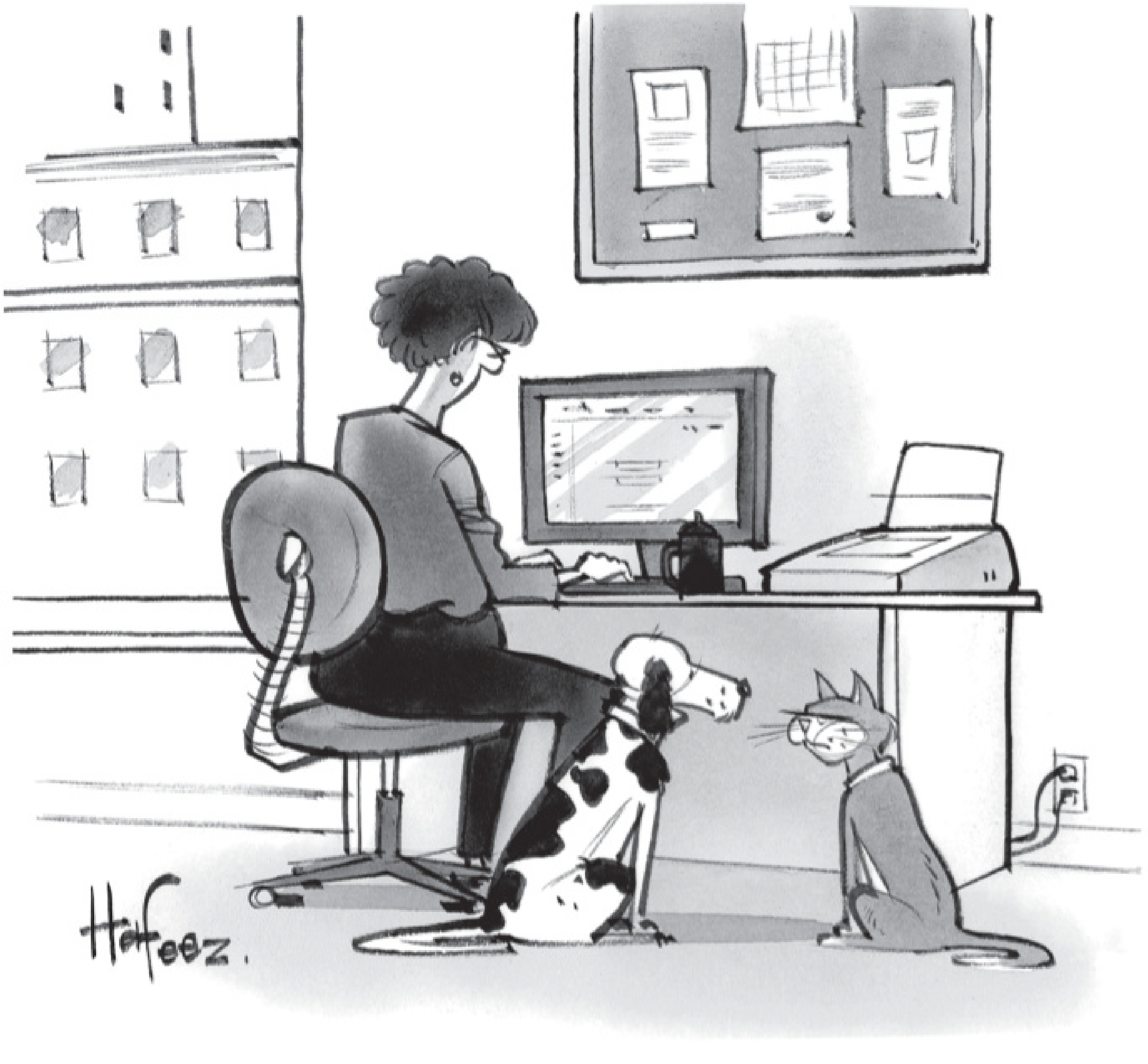
We don't have to, he added.

No, I said. But why not?

So we slipped on our sneakers and walked.

As we rounded the corner of his complex, Joel asked if I knew that less than ten per cent of the world's plastics were actually recycled.

We passed the grocery store by the



"I think we're named after computer passwords."

taquería, and Joel asked if I knew that in 1960 every state in America had anti-sodomy laws.

We rounded the corner of Walgreens, where I learned that spontaneous yawning is exhibited in all vertebrate mammals.

We jogged across Bellaire Boulevard, and I nearly lost a shoe, and Joel asked if I knew that there are only two distinct seasons in the Philippines.

We turned in to an elementary school's playground, tightroping the length of a sandbox, and I learned that the ring-of-fire eclipse is a semi-regular phenomenon, in which Earth's moon blots out everything but the barest silhouette of the sun.

But mostly we walked in silence. There wasn't really a route. Sometimes Joel led, and sometimes I led. When I took too long to round a corner, Joel stopped; whenever he lingered, I turned around to check on him. Then he'd nod, and I'd nod, and we'd start again.

•

Whenever the sun set, my visitor asked more questions about my life. I had nothing to tell him. I'd brought some food home from this fusion Caribbean spot by NRG Stadium, and he picked at the beef patties with his fingers, separating his plantains from his rice.

This is how they packed it, the man said.

You don't like it, I said.

Well, the man said. Our food is hard to cook.

Is it?

For the first time, the man gave me a look, a bemused sort of thing, the look you'd give a certain kind of shithead kid. If I'd blinked, I would've missed it.

I'm just saying I wouldn't know, I said.

You'd know better than anyone else, the man said. Your father loved to cook.

You said he sucked at cooking.

Doesn't mean he didn't love it. But I want to hear more about *you*.

Fine, I said. I work at this gas station. I played football until I fucked up my back. I'm fucking broke.

You work at a store! Like your father.

Sure.

And your mother?

Got sick when I was a kid.

Ai-yah.

Yeah.

She's beautiful.

She's my mom. She was my mom.

She *is* your mother. I always thought he'd end up with someone beautiful.

And what about you, I said. What's your deal?

My deal?

Your life. Your fucking story.

Eh, the man said, and then he didn't say anything else.

He picked a little more at his plate, scooping his peas into piles.

You have anything to drink here, he said. Any beer?

Not really.

A Jamaican with no beer. Glad I lived long enough to see it.

Half, I said. My mom was Canadian.

Is, the man said. And it's all or nothing.

I don't think that's true, I said. And you're changing the subject.

There isn't much to tell, my visitor said. I live on the island. I fish for the market. You really don't have any Red Stripe?

I really don't have any Red Stripe.

Huh, the man said. And no girlfriend, either?

I'm gay.

At this, my visitor covered his mouth. I still don't know whether or not he was feigning it.

And your father? he said. He knew about this, yes?

He did, I said.

Good man. He supported you.

That's one way of putting it.

This made my visitor very quiet. He stood up, and walked into the kitchen. I heard rustling, and then silence, and then more rustling.

In all fairness, my visitor was probably only the third person I'd told whom I wasn't fucking. The second had been Funke, who'd clocked me on sight. What no one tells you is that sometimes, even if you've figured yourself out, you'll have no one around you to share what you've found.

When my visitor came back to the living room, twenty minutes later, I was face down on a pillow.

He sat across from me and put a bowl on the coffee table between us: fried dumplings and avocado slices.

He leaned over, wrapping me in his arms.

Hey, I said.

It's O.K., he said. Relax.

You don't have to do that.

I have to do this.

You don't, I said, but I didn't move, didn't nudge my way out of his arms.

Eventually, my visitor untangled his arms from my body. He motioned toward the food.

Real food, he said. Get it before it gets cold.

•

My father's death was quick. My mother's was quicker. She caught the flu on a Tuesday. We took her to the hospital on a Thursday. She fell into a coma that Saturday, and she was gone four days later.

I was almost fifteen. The last interaction we had was me tugging at the end of her hospital sheets, and her laughing under her breath, covering her mouth. I don't know why this was hilarious, but it was. So we kept doing it. Eventually, my father walked in, and we tried to keep it going, but he didn't get the joke, and of course we couldn't explain it. So we stopped.

•

When I told Joel about this, he sneezed into his elbow. We were eating shabu-shabu at his apartment, in our boxers, and the steam fogged the air between us.

Joel said he knew about the laughter. He'd shared it with his sister.

Sometimes, he said, we'd go on for minutes at a time. I don't think either of us could've said why.

Did you ever talk about it? I asked.

Never, Joel said. We just laughed.

•

Eventually, I told Funke about the dumplings. She gave me a long look, turning away from her phone.

What, I said.

I could ask you the same thing, she said. It's starting to sound like you're taking advantage of this guy.

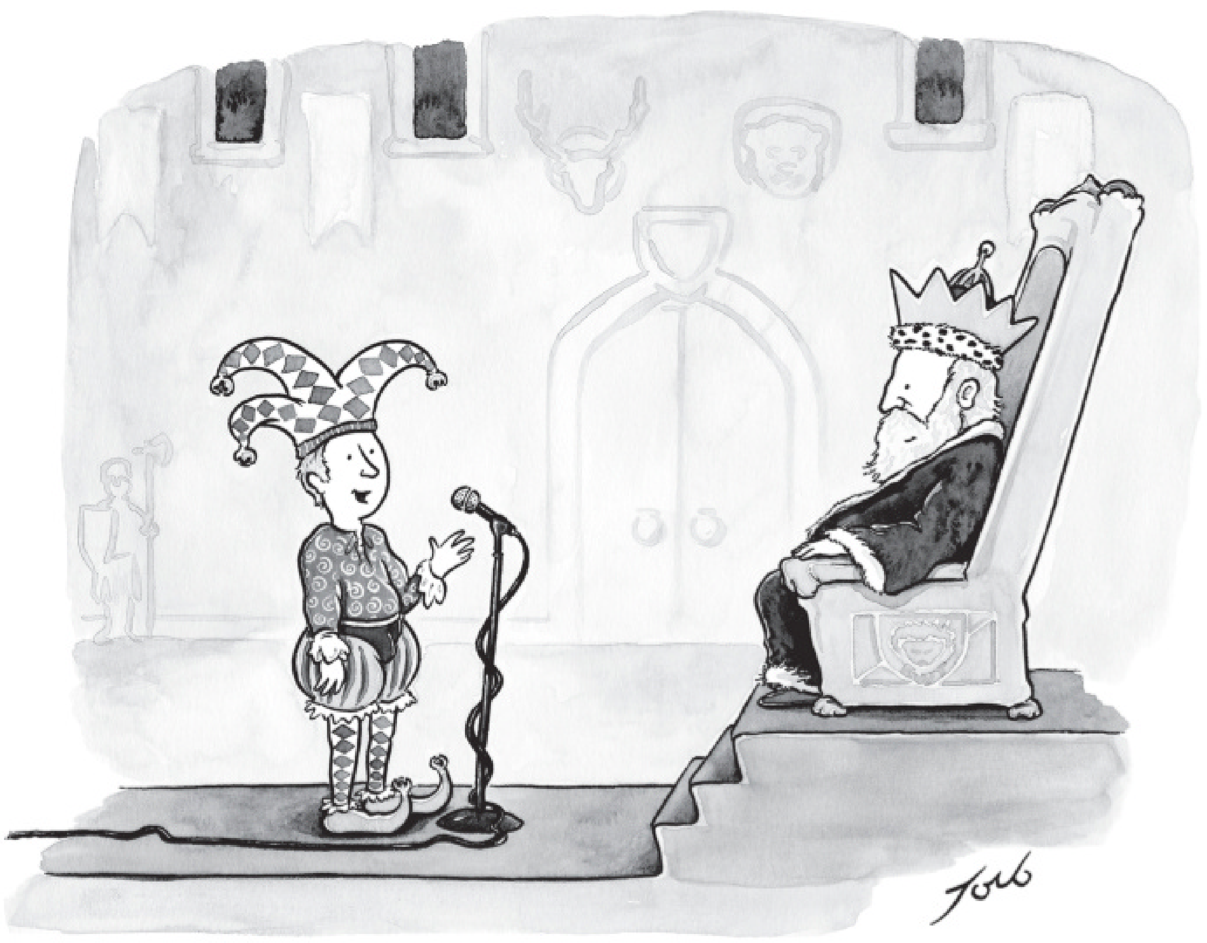
You're fucking joking.

I don't joke.

He's living with me! For free!

Funke crossed her arms and leaned against the register.

A grieving man flies into your life from out of the blue, she said. He just



"Wow, great crowd tonight! Thanks for coming out! Hey, has this ever happened to you? Yesterday I was just doing my thing, minding my own business, and suddenly the peasants got unruly."

found out his lover's died. He's also just found out that the man had a son. How do you think he's feeling? Have you even thought about that?

He's good, I said.

Have you even thought about it?

O.K., I said. You're not even supposed to be on the register.

Don't be mad that I'm right, Funke said, turning back to her phone.

It doesn't even matter, I said. He's leaving in a few days.

It won't hurt you to give a shit about someone else for two minutes, Funke said.

But whatever, she said, and smiled. I guess gay men are still men.

•

That night, my visitor and I sat in the living room. Out of coffee mugs, we drank the Red Stripe I'd picked up. I'd fried some tortillas alongside eggs and tomatoes—the outer limit of my cooking abilities—and my visitor scarfed two at a time, sprinkling shredded cheese and drenching the paper plates in Cholula.

You're a secret chef, he said.

Hardly, I said.

You should take compliments as they come. It'll clear up your skin.

My skin's fine, I said.

Then I said, Tell me something about him.

My visitor grinned. And then he frowned. For the first time since we'd met, his cheeks turned entirely solemn.

Your father never combed his hair, he said. Your father had the softest skin. Your father hated his brothers, but he loved his sister. He couldn't dribble a soccer ball. He hated the walk to school, but he never missed a day of it. He crossed his eyes when he whistled. He couldn't stomach allspice, but he cooked with a heavy hand. He taught me how to swim.

My dad hated the water, I said.

Correct, the man said. And he still taught me. I asked him to do that and he did.

At that, my visitor turned silent. We both chewed, with our legs crossed. I asked what was wrong.

It's nothing, the man said.

Nothing's nothing.

So you're a sober philosopher, the man said.

I mean that it's nothing to *you*, I said.

Then I asked the man, Were you there when he left Jamaica?

My visitor looked up at me. He looked away.

No, he said. I told your father not to tell me.

Why?

Because that was easier. What could I have done?

And I thought about that. What could he have done? Two boys meet on an island where they shouldn't be meeting at all. They feel things that they shouldn't be feeling at all. They do what they can. One of them leaves. And then he dies.

What *could* he have done?

•

Later that night, at his place, Joel asked me what we were doing.

We stood barefoot in his kitchen, hunched over his counter, kneading dough. Immediately after fucking, I'd mentioned, offhand, that something sweet wouldn't be a bad idea, and Joel had gone over to the pantry. Now he patted and stirred while I massaged. We dropped globs of sugary dough into the fryer beside us.

Cooking, I said.

I think, Joel said, that we're doing more than that. And I think that you know it. And I think that we should talk about that.

We're talking now, I said.

When Joel went silent, I looked up. The sizzling beside us was all I could hear.

I feel pretty good about you, he said, sighing. All things considered.

Noted, I said.

And I'd like to know if you feel the same. It would mean a lot to me to know that.

But what if I don't feel what you feel, I asked.

Then nothing changes, Joel said. Except that I'd know.

O.K., I said, and what if I do?

Then I don't know, Joel said. But you have to say it. I can't know unless you tell me.

Neither of us said anything to that, until we noticed that the batter was smoking. We lifted three sweet pancakes from the pan to a bowl, and Joel immediately tossed one into his mouth—but not before tearing off a piece for me.

It burned me. It was delicious. We both reached for another.

•

The night before my visitor flew back to Kingston, I drove him to see my father's tombstone. I smoked by some vending machines instead of wandering the graves beside him, because I'd spent too much time there already. I'll never know if he cried.

Afterward, we sat at Fu Fu Café, a Chinese diner twenty minutes from my apartment. The evening bled through the windows. We settled into chairs at the one empty table. I was friendly with one of the waiters, and he smiled my way, then he said something to my visitor in Mandarin, and my visitor only shook his head, cheesing.

Our waiter looked at me. I shrugged. He shrugged right back. A few minutes later, a spread of chicken and noodles and spinach sat in front of us.

Who was General Tso really, my visitor said.

This is what you want to talk about, I said. Of all the fucking things.

I refuse to believe something so delicious could be the work of a war man.

That's very poetic.

All Jamaicans are poets, my visitor said.

That's bullshit, I said.

It's poetry, my visitor said.

He sipped at a beer, and rubbed his cheeks. In between bites, he looked up and smiled my way.

You should find a boyfriend, he said. Someone steady.

Thank you for your advice.

It's true. I know this. There's some nice boy walking around Houston, with untied shoelaces, waiting to make you happy.

Calm down, I said. And I'm seeing someone.

This made my visitor stand, shaking the table.

Good! the man said.

Can you stop that?

You should've told me! You didn't tell me! What's his name?

I'll tell you if you sit down, I said.

The man settled into his seat. He crossed his legs, stumping his chin in a palm.

Joel, I said.

Joel, my visitor said.

But it probably doesn't matter, I said. I don't even know if it'll work.

Don't take too long to figure it out, the man said.

Well. It's complicated.

Nothing's that complicated.

You wouldn't know. I'm not exactly on top of the sexual pyramid.

Now you're making assumptions about me, my visitor said, smiling.

We looked at the tables beside us—Korean couples and Mexican families and some Nigerian nurses enjoying the end of their workday.

I think you could be more kind to yourself, the man said. And I think you should give this boy a chance. Give yourselves a chance to be happy.

And how exactly would I do that, I said.

Do what?

Make a dude happy. Make someone happy.

Oh, the man said. That's easy. You don't have to do much. A little attention goes a long way. A little bit of food. A fuck from time to time.

This dinner isn't going to end with you teaching me some massive lesson about myself, I said. Life isn't like that.

Sure, my visitor said. But it's not so hard to understand, either.

You get it, though.

I do. Your father did, too.

I opened my mouth, but then I closed it.

I figured I'd let him have that.

And my visitor gave me another one of his long looks, scratching at the hair on his cheeks, chewing his lip. He looked a little different in the lights above us. A little like he was glowing. I wondered if I did, too.

And then my visitor said, Your father told me we'd see each other before we died. That was the promise.

A promise, I said. That's romantic.

He was romantic.

He wasn't that romantic.

Ai-yah, the man said.

The thing on both of our minds hung above us, swaying below the lights.

He did, the man said. If that's what you're thinking.

When I made a face, my visitor shook his head.

Your father held his end of the deal, he said. Even if he didn't come back to the island.

That's bullshit, I said. That's nothing.

And this made the man smile. He took my hand in his.

You don't understand, he said. And that's O.K. I don't expect you to understand.

When our waiter returned, my visitor said something to him, something I couldn't catch. The two of them laughed, rocking the entire table.

•

A few weeks before my dad's funeral, I'd visited him at his home in Spring. We didn't see each other often. There was always a reason to avoid it. After my mom died, he'd mostly lived by himself. He'd entertain a girlfriend from time to time, but no one ever stuck around, and I wondered whether they grew tired of him, or he grew tired of them, or if the relationships were constructed from the start to fizzle out like matches.

He answered the door with sleep on his face. I had to remind him that he'd called me over to help with some insurance paperwork. It took him a second, but then he nodded, waving me in and wiping his face.

There was luggage in the hallway, but I didn't ask him about it. I didn't want him asking me about my life, either.

He clicked through channels while I typed at his computer in the kitchen. I'd call out for details—an aunt's maiden name, a first childhood pet—and my father yelled them from his perch on the sofa. Then there was another question, your first love, and I typed in my mother's name and that didn't work. I called my dad over, but I didn't tell him why. I told him there was a question I didn't know, could he fill it in.

My father stumbled over to the computer. He typed something in, wordlessly. And I sat down and finished the rest of his paperwork. I put my hand on his shoulder before I left, and I told him I'd see him in a few weeks, but something came up so I didn't go. ♦

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST
Bryan Washington reads "Visitor."

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

INTEGRATION BY PARTS

Have we outgrown the need for affirmative action?

BY LOUIS MENAND

The terrible paradox of the civil-rights movement is that outlawing racial discrimination made it harder to remediate its effects. Once we amended the Constitution and passed laws to protect people of color from being treated differently in ways that were harmful to them, the government had trouble enacting programs that treat people of color differently in ways that might be beneficial. We took race out of the equation only to realize that, if we truly wanted not just equality of opportunity for all Americans but equality of result, we needed to put it back in. Our name for this paradox is affirmative action.

The term was introduced to the Kennedy Administration almost sixty years ago, and its arrival was somewhat haphazard. According to Nicholas Lemann's history of meritocracy, "The Big Test," the man who suggested it was an African-American lawyer named Hobart Taylor, Jr. He was a Texan, and when John F. Kennedy was sworn in, in 1961, he dropped in on the inaugural ball for Texans in order to shake hands with the new Vice-President, Lyndon B. Johnson.

They chatted, and Johnson asked him to come by his office. When Taylor showed up, Johnson handed him a draft of what would become Executive Order 10925, setting up the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, which Johnson was to chair. Taylor read the draft and said he thought it could use a little work; Johnson asked him to do a rewrite. And that is when Taylor inserted the words "affirmative action." He liked the phrase, he later said, because of the alliteration (or the assonance).

Taylor needed a flexible phrase because Kennedy's committee was a bureaucratic entity with a vague mandate meant to signal the Administration's commitment to fairness in employment. Its purview, like the purview of committees dating back to the Administration of Franklin Roosevelt, was the awarding of federal contracts, and its mandate was to see that companies the federal government did business with did not discriminate on the basis of race. The committee had no real enforcement mechanism, though, so "affirmative action" was intended to communicate to firms that needed to integrate their workforce something like "Don't just stand there. Do something." What they were supposed to do, aside from not discriminating, was unspecified.

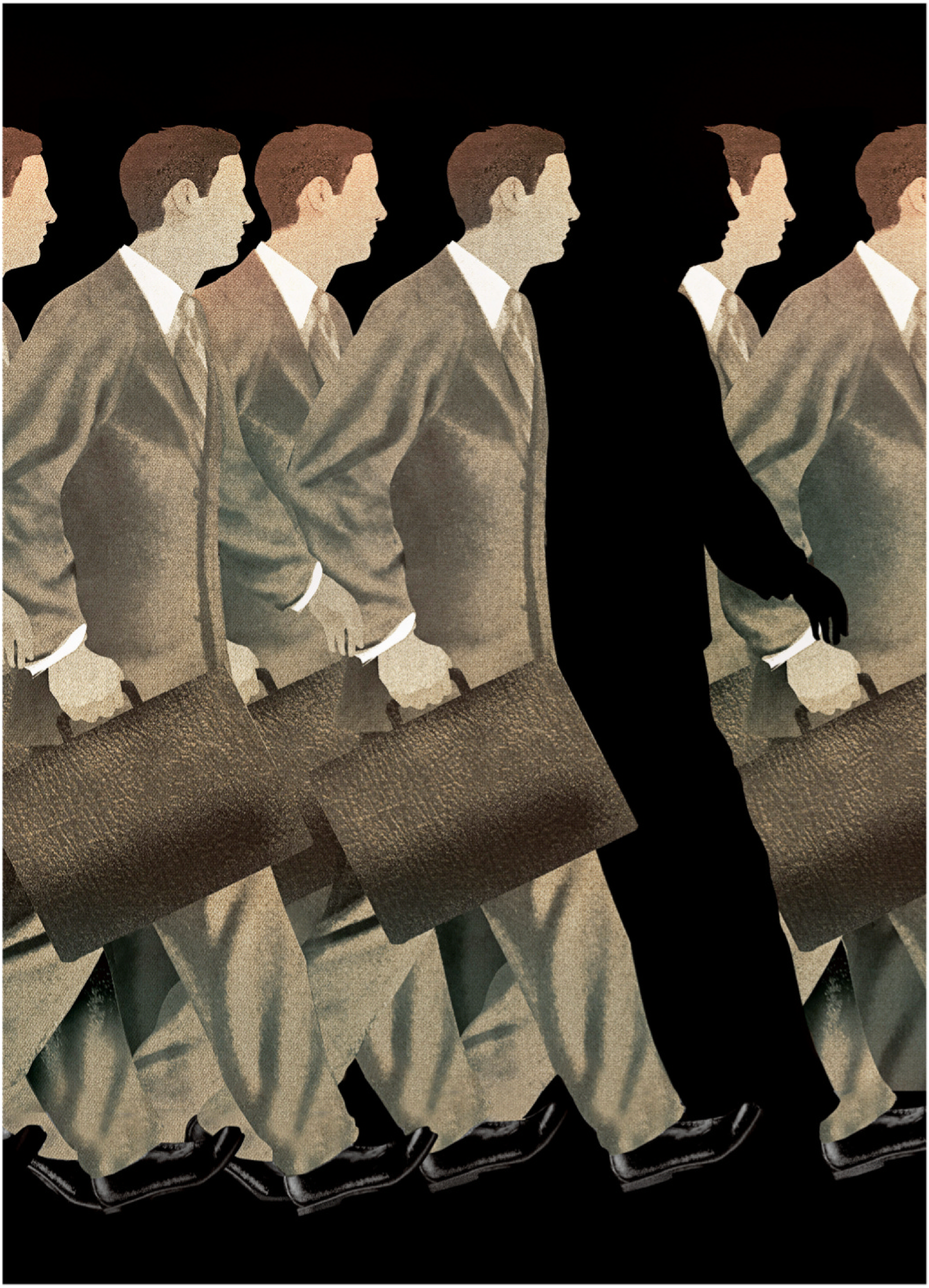
"Do something" is still one of the meanings of "affirmative action" today. Many firms and educational institutions have affirmative-action or diversity officers. Their job is to insure not only that hiring and promotion are handled in a color-blind manner but that good-faith efforts are made to include racial minorities (and sometimes individuals in other categories, such as women or veterans or disabled persons) in the hiring pool, and, if they are qualified, to attempt to recruit them. In this context, "affirmative" means: demonstrate that you did your best to find and promote members of underrepresented groups. You do not have to give them preferential treatment.

Since the late nineteen-sixties, however, affirmative action has also had a more proactive meaning, as the name of an effort to attain a certain number, or, as it's called today, "critical mass," of underrepresented groups in a business or an educational institution by, if necessary, giving applicants from those groups preference over similarly or better qualified whites. This form of affirmative action is usually branded by those who disapprove of it with the dreaded Q-word, "quota." After 1978, when the Supreme Court declared racial quotas unconstitutional, affirmative-action programs avoided any suggestion of the Q-word. But that is essentially what affirmative action in this second sense entails. You can use terms like "targets" and "goals," both of which are constitutionally legit, but if you have an idea of the point at which you would attain a critical mass then you have a quota.

Apart from stone-cold racists, everyone is happy, or claims to be happy, with affirmative action in the first sense. And many people are happy, or will say they are, with affirmative action in the second sense so far as the outcome is concerned. Legally, we want the system to be color-blind; we want everyone to have the same rights. But socially we understand that people don't want their racial or gender identities to be ignored. They want them to be recognized and respected. People take a civic pride in having a racially diverse workplace or educational institution. It's just that many would rather not contemplate too closely the means used to achieve it.

Of the people who like racial diversity but don't like affirmative action in the preferential sense, there are two types. One type believes that we can ban all forms of preferential treatment and, so long as we enforce existing

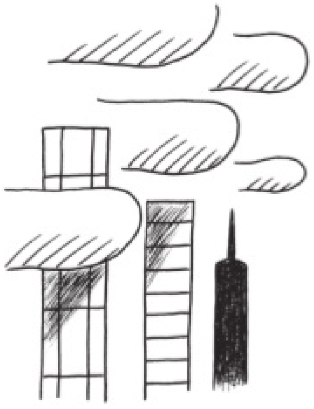
ABOVE: SERGE BLOCH



Many people take civic pride in racial diversity but would rather not contemplate too closely the means used to achieve it.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN STAUFFER

laws against discrimination, still achieve equality of result. These people see affirmative action as unfairly penalizing those who are not biased themselves and who have enjoyed no personal benefit from discrimination, and they see it as stigmatizing members of underrepresented groups with the suspicion that they are underqualified for the jobs they hold or the school they attend.



The other type of affirmative-action skeptic is the person who knows that this is wishful thinking but is unable to get his or her head around the idea that the way to end discrimination is by discriminating. The law professor Melvin Urofsky, in "The Affirmative Action Puzzle" (Pantheon), says he is agnostic on the issue, but he would seem to be a person of the second type. He wants racial diversity, and he knows that it is not going to come about on its own very soon, but he thinks that specific goals or targets are at odds with the rights of individuals. That's why he calls it a puzzle.

The history of affirmative action is woven into the history of American race relations, and the history of American race relations is woven into the history of America. It is the eternal bone in the national throat. So when Urofsky takes us through the history of affirmative action—he starts with Reconstruction, but the story really begins in the nineteen-sixties—he is giving us what amounts to a history of the country from John F. Kennedy to Donald Trump.

You see the decades go past as you read, and the special flavor of each Presidency comes back: Kennedy's uncomfortable recognition that civil rights was a moral issue that transcended his customary political pragmatism, Johnson's miraculous emergence as the Moses of racial equality, Nixon's inveterate scheming, Reagan's bland duplicity, Obama's undramatic realism. Then we get to Trump, who, Urofsky points out, "is the first Republican since the civil rights revolution to reach the White House without campaigning against affirmative action." Urofsky doesn't say so, but one reason Trump ignored the issue is probably that politicians who oppose affirmative action normally do so in the name of color blindness, and Trump is not color-blind. (Alternative-facts explanation: Donald Trump is the least racist person you have ever met.)

There is a whole library on racial inequality and efforts to address it, and "The Affirmative Action Puzzle" does not offer many novelties. But the book, just by the accumulation of sixty years' worth of evidence, allows us to reach some useful conclusions, and the most important of these is that affirmative action worked. The federal government, with the backing of the courts, weaponized the 1964 Civil Rights Act and its legislative progeny—notably the Education Amendments of 1972, home to the notorious (in the R.B.G. sense) Title IX, banning sex discrimination in federally assisted educational institutions—and forced businesses to hire women and racial minorities.

And they did. Study after study suggests that it is just not the case that "it would have happened anyway." In 1981, for example, as Urofsky tells us, the Reagan Labor Department commissioned a report on gains in hiring among African-Americans and women. It found that between 1974 and 1980 the rate of minority employment in businesses that contracted with the federal government, and were therefore susceptible to being squeezed, rose by twenty per cent, and the rate of employment of women rose by 15.2 per cent. In companies that did not contract with the government, the rates were twelve per cent and 2.2 per cent, respectively.

This was so contrary to everything that Reagan had been saying about affirmative action that the Labor Department hired an outside consulting firm to vet its own report. When the firm returned with the news that the methods and the conclusions were valid, the Administration did the only thing it could do. It refused to release the report, thus allowing politicians to go on telling the public that affirmative action didn't work.

But it did. And guess what? So did the War on Poverty. In 1959, the poverty rate was an estimated twenty-two per cent; in 1975, it was below twelve per cent, which is about where it is today. (That is still thirty-eight million people, more than the population of Canada.) The claim that government programs always backfire was Reagan's campaign calling card—even though he did not eliminate a single major spending program during the eight years he was in office—and it has become one of the most dangerous canards in American politics. Politicians repeat it, and people nod their heads. Meanwhile, the rich get richer.

Did white men suffer as a result of affirmative action? That turns out to be a difficult question to answer. "There is very little hard evidence to prove that a minority hire almost always took place at the expense of a better-qualified white person," Urofsky says. He also tells us that there are "no reliable data" on whether men were shut out of jobs that were offered to women.

"Almost always" would indeed be hard to prove. Obviously, just by the nature of the policy, some significant number of whites and males who would have been admitted or hired before affirmative-action programs were in place were not. But, since no employer or admissions officer ever says, "You were not hired because you're white" or "You were admitted because you're black," proving discrimination is complicated. Americans have come to accept that race and gender are always in the mix, but we can't be certain that either one made the difference in any particular case.

Urofsky's view is that, over all, white men did not go without jobs or the chance to attend college. Turned down by one place, they went someplace else. The number who were "victimized" by affirmative action, he says, is "minuscule." Certainly this is true in the case of college admissions. Most colleges accept almost everyone who applies, so when we talk about race-conscious admissions we are talking about policies that affect a relatively small number of people. Urofsky borrows from Thomas Kane, of the Brookings Institution, an analogy to handicapped parking spaces: a driver looking to park who does not have a permit might feel "excluded" driving past an empty handicapped spot, but he or she usually finds a place to park.

The main source of Urofsky's frustration is the Supreme Court, which, he complains, has spent fifty years kicking around the constitutionality of race-conscious hiring and admissions practices without ever coming up with what he calls "a workable jurisprudence." There is no Brown v. Board of Education or Roe v. Wade for affirmative action, no well-established precedent. A lot of the cases that people rely on about university admissions are 5–4 decisions. And some of the Court's opinions have suggested that, insofar as affirmative action constitutes an exception to the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, it will eventually time out (much as a majority of the Court recently decided, in Shelby v. Holder, that part of the Voting Rights Act has outlived our need for it).

The Court's unpredictability in such cases not only distresses law professors like Urofsky. It also creates uncertainty in the marketplace. The judicial parameters are known: to pass constitutional muster, an affirmative-action program must serve a compelling state interest, it must be narrowly tailored, and it must survive strict scrutiny. But one can never be sure how the Court will apply these criteria, or whether it will one day decide that all affirmative-action programs are unconstitutional per se and close out the exception. So groups that oppose racial preferences keep relitigating what is basically the same case, in the hope that a shift in the Court's makeup will produce a definitive result. The Court is effectively inviting these lawsuits.

The marketplace matters because the biggest defenders of affirmative action are not the N.A.A.C.P. and the Democratic National Committee. The biggest defenders are corporations and the military. Thousands of firms adopted affirmative-action programs after 1969, when the Nixon Administration began insisting on diversity benchmarks for government contractors, and "in little more than a decade," Urofsky says, "affirmative action became a way of life for many large corporations." Once those programs were put into place, they remained.

The same thing happened with the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The most controversial part of that act was Title II, which applies to public accommodations, like restaurants and hotels. This struck at what was, along with suppression of African-American voting rights, one of the pillars of Jim Crow: social segregation. In December, 1964, five months after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law, the Supreme Court, in Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States, upheld the constitutionality of Title II under the commerce clause. All public accommodations that fell within the reach of Congress's power were prohibited from discriminating.

This was not a blow to business. On the contrary. From a business viewpoint, refusing to serve people who want to rent a room in your hotel or order a sandwich at your lunch counter is irrational. The only economic incentive for denying them service is a fear of their driving white customers away. Once the Court made it clear that every hotel and lunch counter must serve every customer regardless of race, that fear was significantly reduced.

Under Jimmy Carter, affirmative-action requirements were extended to virtually all firms, educational institutions, and state and local governments that received contracts or grants from the federal government—which covers a lot of the national waterfront. By and large, the courts went along. And so did businesses. When a company is serving customers of different races, it wants to present a diversified face. If you are selling cars to African-Americans, you do not want all the salesmen in your showroom to be white.

If, to achieve this result, a company diversifies on its own, it is open to lawsuits claiming reverse discrimination. But when a company (or a police department or a fire department) adopts a race-conscious hiring program under government guidance it is immunized. When Reagan made noises about abolishing affirmative-action requirements, the National Association of Manufacturers lobbied him to leave the program alone. It was helping manufacturing companies do what they could not have done without it. The biggest problem businesses had wasn't that they couldn't find qualified women and minorities. It was dealing

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"O.K., I may have had one bite."

with labor unions, whose seniority systems overwhelmingly favored white male workers. (Small businesses also resented the paperwork.)

The extent of the corporate buy-in was put on dramatic display in 2003, when the Supreme Court heard Grutter v. Bollinger, another admissions case, this one involving the University of Michigan Law School. The Court received sixty-nine amicus briefs (a lot) arguing in favor of Michigan's affirmative-action admissions program, and among the amici were General Motors, Dow Chemical, and Intel, along with the largest federation of unions in the United States, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. They supported affirmative-action admissions because they wanted universities to produce educated people for a diversified workforce.

The Court also received, in Grutter, what became known as "the military brief." This was an amicus brief signed by big-name generals like Norman Schwarzkopf, Wesley Clark, and John Shalikashvili; by a former Defense Secretary, William Cohen; and by former superintendents of the service academies, all of which, of course, are government agencies. "At present," they told the Court, "the military cannot achieve an officer corps that is *both* highly qualified *and* racially diverse unless the service academies and the ROTC use limited race-conscious recruiting and admissions policies." They were saying that if the Court ruled against Michigan it would be upending efforts, up to that point highly successful, to maintain a diverse officer corps. The Court voted to uphold the Michigan program, but it was a 5–4 decision.

No sector is more committed to diversity than higher education is, but it has proved to be one of the stickiest areas for affirmative action, both legally and practically. Urofsky, perhaps because he is an academic, is more patient with the trouble that universities have had in achieving diversity than he is with the problems of labor unions, to which, in general, he is uncharitable. It is true that probably the main reason Nixon promoted affirmative-action programs was to pit African-Americans against labor, both traditionally Democratic voting bases. And, by many accounts, he succeeded, and created Archie Bunker—the Reagan Democrat, a man who resents special government help for minorities. Still, the leadership of unions like the United Auto Workers, though sometimes fighting their own membership, were active in support of civil rights.

Higher education and unions have a similar problem when it comes to changing the demographics: we are dealing with a cake that cannot be unbaked. The undergraduate population turns over every four years, but the faculty turns over every forty years. When the new students arrive on campus, they often wonder where the professors of color are. The answer is: wait twenty years, and they will show up.

Even so, the lag in diversification between university faculties and their student bodies is striking. As late as 1969, less than five per cent of all professors had African or Asian ancestry, and around eighty per cent were men. Schools like Harvard and Stanford have had trouble even getting to gender balance. In 1976, women made up 1.6 per cent of the arts and sciences faculty at Yale and one per cent at Princeton, although both schools had been admitting women for seven years. Even at Berkeley, which had been admitting women since 1871, women made up just 5.6 per cent of the faculty. Today, less than thirty per cent of all university faculty at Stanford are women, and seven per cent are classified as underrepresented minorities. At Harvard, twenty-seven per cent of tenured faculty are women, and eight per cent are underrepresented minorities.

On the other hand, student bodies, where race- and gender-conscious admissions policies can have an effect more quickly, *have* diversified. In 1976, eighty-three per cent of university students were white; in 2016, fifty-seven per cent were white. The percentage of black students in that period increased from ten to fourteen; the percentage of students that the government categorizes as Hispanic increased from less than four to more than eighteen. The percentage of black and Latinx graduates (as opposed to enrollees) also increased (although graduation rates for both groups are lower than for whites).

Did affirmative-action admissions help? Starting in the mid-nineties, opponents of affirmative action were able to get laws passed prohibiting the use of race in admissions at public universities in several states, including Michigan, Washington, and California. The top public universities in those states tried to attract minority students by other means, but Urofsky says that the percentage of black and Hispanic students has dropped significantly.

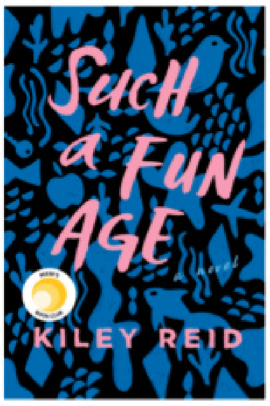
Do students admitted under affirmative-action criteria benefit from their educations? Historically, black students as a group have tended to underperform academically—to get lower grades than their SAT scores predict. (So do varsity athletes.) Nevertheless, William Bowen and Derek Bok showed, in "The Shape of the River" (1998)—the most rigorous statistical analysis of race-conscious college admissions to that point—that of seven hundred black students who entered twenty-eight selective schools under race-preferential criteria in 1976, thirty-two per cent attained doctorates or professional degrees, as compared with thirty-seven per cent of white students. Nearly a hundred and twenty-five of the black students were business executives, and more than three hundred were "civic leaders" (running youth or community groups, for example). Race-conscious admissions policies, Bowen and Bok concluded, have been "highly successful" in advancing educational and societal goals.

As many writers have pointed out, when we are considering colleges and jobs, there is a pipeline problem. That's why, as Urofsky notes, the greatest beneficiaries of affirmative action have been white women. They went to the same high schools that their brothers did (and most of them probably got better grades). That's also why Barack Obama seemed to be focussed more on improving K-12 for minority children than on expanding access to post-secondary education. The success of affirmative action in employment and university admissions has not eliminated the education and income gaps between whites and blacks. Although the poverty rate for blacks and Hispanics has dropped some since 1970, it is still more than double the rate for whites. Americans of color are starting from much farther behind. Millions never get on board a train that most whites were born on.

The Supreme Court case that admissions offices rely on today is Regents of the University of California v. Bakke. It was decided in 1978, and, despite several attempts to relitigate it, it is still the law of the land. Bakke is a good example of the jurisprudential confusion around affirmative action: the Court managed to produce six opinions in that case. The plurality opinion, by Lewis Powell, struck down an admissions program at the University of California at Davis School of Medicine, from which Allan Bakke, a white man, had been twice rejected, but it upheld the right of schools to use race-conscious admissions programs.

The problem at Davis was that the medical school basically ran two admissions processes, one for everybody and one that effectively considered only

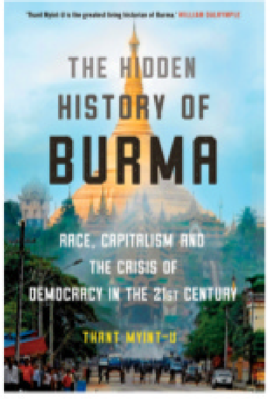
BRIEFLY NOTED



Such a Fun Age, *by Kiley Reid (Putnam)*. Early in this lively début novel, a security guard at an upscale grocery store accuses Emira, a young black woman, of kidnapping the white toddler she is babysitting. In the aftermath, Emira, mortified, resolves to find a new job, while the well-meaning but delusional mom-blogger who employs her becomes obsessed with winning her affection and loyalty. The result is a carefully observed study of class and race, whose portrait of white urban affluence—Everlane sweaters, pseudo-feminist babble—is especially pointed. Attempting to navigate the white conscience in the age of Black Lives Matter, Reid unsparingly maps the moments when good intentions founder.

Wake, Siren
Ovid Resung
Nina MacLaughlin

Wake, Siren: Ovid Resung, *by Nina MacLaughlin (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. "A certain sort of voice tells the story long enough and part of you ends up believing it." So explains Medusa, one of more than thirty women from Ovid's Metamorphoses who reclaim their stories in this stirring collection of vignettes. The women of MacLaughlin's retelling drink kombucha, dabble in oxycodone, wear jeans and sneakers, and call the King of Thebes "this asshole jock." Above all, they both suffer and find strength at the hands of lascivious men and wrathful gods. The blind prophet Tiresias, reflecting on his cross-gender experience, says, "Was it punishment, being turned into a woman? I don't know. Is it punishing to be a woman? It is. It will continue to be."


The Hidden History of Burma
Race, Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century
Thant Myint-U

The Hidden History of Burma, *by Thant Myint-U (Norton)*. A decade ago, Burma observers celebrated the spectacle of a military junta's acquiescence to popular pressure for reform. The subsequent tenure of Aung San Suu Kyi has revealed the naïveté of such optimism, and this analysis by a Burmese historian and former Presidential adviser emphasizes the factors that were ignored: widening inequality, turbocharged capitalism coupled with a weak state, and rampant identity politics, which has intensified a seven-decade civil war and ignited ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. Myint-U calls for a radically reimagined national narrative, celebrating diversity and socially inclusive economic development. Without it, he writes, "we risk a failed state in the heart of Asia."

Alice Adams
Portrait of a Writer
Carol Sklenicka

Alice Adams, *by Carol Sklenicka (Scribner)*. Dubbed "America's Colette," Alice Adams (1926-99) was known for emotionally unsparing stories and novels that often reflected her own complex relationships. This psychologically intimate biography frames her work as a testament to the possibilities and paradoxes encountered by astute, ambitious women of her time. From her childhood, in Chapel Hill, to her time in postwar Europe and her later years in San Francisco, Adams strove for independence and creative fulfillment, but also yearned for affection and romance, a tension that informs her fiction. Sklenicka celebrates Adams's work and persuasively situates it in an era characterized both by drastic cultural changes and by the persistence of old expectations, conventions, and biases.

minority applicants, for whom sixteen places were set aside. Bakke was able to show that his record was superior to the records of some of the students who had been admitted through the special program.

The Davis program was obviously not narrowly tailored. One consideration that the university offered in the way of compelling state interest was its belief that minority M.D.s might end up practicing in underserved communities. Powell found no evidentiary basis for this, and it was arguably a racist assumption. The school could have investigated whether applicants had worked with underserved communities in the past. They did not, and Powell suggested that such a standard might be a better proxy than race. Another consideration Davis offered was the aim of "countering the effects of societal discrimination." But Powell, though he allowed that specific race-conscious remedies could be justified by specific instances of discrimination, dismissed the general invocation of discrimination as "an amorphous concept of injury that may be ageless in its reach into the past."

Still, Powell did think that the goal of a diversified medical-school class was constitutionally permissible, and he played a trump card that is almost never mentioned in discussions of the case, including Urofsky's. Admissions programs determined by race are in violation of both the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlaws racial discrimination in institutions that receive federal funding. Those rights were largely on Bakke's side: you couldn't discriminate against whites simply because nonwhites had once been discriminated against. Powell argued, however, that another right was in play: the First Amendment; specifically, the right of academic freedom. There is no constitutional right of academic freedom, but Powell cited a 1957 case, Sweezy v. New Hampshire, in which Felix Frankfurter, in a concurring opinion, quoted South African jurists to the effect that the principle of academic freedom allows a university to determine who will teach its classes and who will sit in its classrooms.

Powell concluded that, since Davis could reasonably decide that a diverse class provides a better learning environment, considerations of an applicant's race—as one factor among others—can fall within the exercise of a constitutionally protected right. (Under the Court's ruling, Bakke was admitted to Davis and he became a doctor; Urofsky says that he went on to work at the Mayo Clinic, where one of his patients was Lewis Powell.)

The Michigan case, Grutter v. Bollinger, in 2003, was basically a relitigation of Bakke. As was Fisher v. Texas, in 2013, and the second round of that case, known as Fisher II, in 2016. The Fisher cases involved a white woman who was turned down for admission to the University of Texas at Austin, U.T.'s flagship campus. Her lawyers argued that, even if she were rejected solely because of her grades and not her race, she could still claim a "Constitutional injury" from being subjected to an unfair admissions process. Each time, the Court upheld the constitutionality of using race as a factor in admissions, but they were close calls. The vote in Fisher II was 4–3.

The current Harvard College admissions case, Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard, is the same case one more time. The person behind both Fisher and the Harvard case is Edward Blum, a man who for whatever reason has decided to devote his time to preventing a small number of black and brown teen-agers from attending colleges that are desperate to have them.

Harvard won at the trial level because the judge ruled that its admissions program is consistent with other Supreme Court decisions, such as Bakke. That's not surprising, since Powell's decision cited the Harvard admissions program as a model. But, given the composition of the Supreme Court, it is all too likely that it will decide that the country has timed out of this particular form of remediation.

For remediation is fundamentally what affirmative action is. Affirmative action has expanded to cover many kinds of difference, and, since Bakke, to be thought of as in service to a general social commitment to diversity per se—so that now people say things like "What about diversity of ideology?," as though that somehow presented the same moral demand as a commitment to racial diversity.

But the reason we have affirmative action is that we once had slavery and Jim Crow and redlining and racial covenants, and that we once had all-white police forces and all-white union locals and all-white college campuses and all-white law firms. To paraphrase George Shultz, Nixon's Secretary of Labor: for hundreds of years, the United States had a racial quota. It was zero. Affirmative action is an attempt to redress an injustice done to black people. The Fourteenth Amendment protects white people, too, but that is not why it needed to be written.

The Court's decision in Shelby v. Holder vacating a central provision of the Voting Rights Act has backfired. It turns out that, when you remove enforcement mechanisms and remedial oversight, things tend to revert to the status quo ante. The whole history of affirmative action shows, as Urofsky somewhat reluctantly admits, that when the programs are shut down minority representation drops. Diversity, however we define it, is politically constructed and politically maintained. It doesn't just happen. It's a choice we make as a society.

It is possible to understand the opposition to affirmative action of white conservatives, like Ronald Reagan, who regard civil-rights laws as federal overreach and affirmative action as enshrining the un-American notion of group rights. And it is possible to understand the opposition of black conservatives, like Clarence Thomas, who see it as patronizing to African-Americans.

But it is hard to understand the opposition, often diehard, of many white liberals that has persisted since the nineteen-seventies. Did these people really imagine that passing a law against discrimination would reset race relations overnight? Do they really think that white Americans, wherever they work or go to college, do not carry a lifelong advantage because of the color of their skin? Do they really believe that there should be no sacrifice to make or price to pay for the systematic damage done to the lives of millions of American citizens and the men and women who are their ancestors? ♦

BOOKS

FROM MINOR TO MAJOR

The pleasure and pain of being Cole Porter.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

Back in 1976, the incomparable drama critic Kenneth Tynan wondered in his diary when someone was "going to take a deep breath and declare that, at some time in the thirties, the serious music tradition finally withered, curled up and died of sterility and malnutrition; and that the greatest composers of the twentieth century are Berlin, Rodgers, Porter, Kern, Gershwin, et al." This view, bold enough at the time to be fit only for a diary, has by now become commonplace. In the mid-nineteen-seventies, you had to haunt London record shops to find Ella Fitzgerald's Gershwin or Cole Porter albums. Now those recordings, and the songs they illuminate, are everywhere. Prompted, perhaps, by the publication, in the early seventies, of Alec Wilder's groundbreaking study, "American Popular Song: The Great Innovators 1900-1950," the old songwriters have come to have a new presence, and their songs even a collective brand name: the American Songbook. Their music is now taken up routinely by the same rock singers who once seemed to have overshadowed them, with some (Van Morrison singing "A Foggy Day") oddly good, some (Rod Stewart singing "Someone to Watch Over Me") oddly bad, and some (Bob Dylan singing "The Night We Called It a Day") just odd.

The artist's genial and productive surface masked turbulent waters.

Like all victories in art, this one has a double-edged result. On the one hand, the music is, mostly, out there. On the other, the essential work of discrimination is lost in a blanketing cloud of nostalgia. Embattled memory takes things apart; complacent nostalgia squashes them back together. The first wave of rediscovery had ukases and prohibitions—Alec Wilder wrote off essentially all of Rodgers and Hammerstein, and almost everything self-consciously "jazzy" in Gershwin. (He preferred Harold Arlen, who knew jazz inside out, to Gershwin—a shocking view then.) These days, a smiling, everyone-together spirit inflects the appreciative albums and Lincoln Center celebrations; Tynan's "et al." covers a lot of talents, big and small. When you are in the middle of a battle, as Wilder was, it is important to sort out the fighters from the freeloaders. Once it has been won, everybody gets a medal.

So, with squads of scholars arriving on the field after the battle, to tend the wounded and bury the dead, we have a renewed chance not just to get the story right but to get the stature right, to figure out who ranks where and why. Certainly, Porter's ghost could not ask for better care than he has been given in "The Letters of Cole Porter" (Yale), edited by Cliff Eisen, a professor of music history at King's College London, and Dominic McHugh, a musicologist at the University of Sheffield (and the editor of Alan Jay Lerner's letters). Laid out with a meticulous scholarly apparatus, as though this were the correspondence of Grover Cleveland, every turn in the songwriter's story is deep-dived for exact chronology, and every name casually dropped by Porter gets a worried, explicatory footnote. The editors have also included some secondary material that is not, strictly speaking, correspondence at all, such as a hair-raising journal of the mid-thirties M-G-M movie project that became the Eleanor Powell vehicle "Born to Dance."

As an artist's letters, they are, truth be told, disappointing. There are few flights of fancy or spontaneous improvisations in Porter's writings to friends—for such a famous wit, there is remarkably little wit. The most arresting passages of writing and thinking arrive

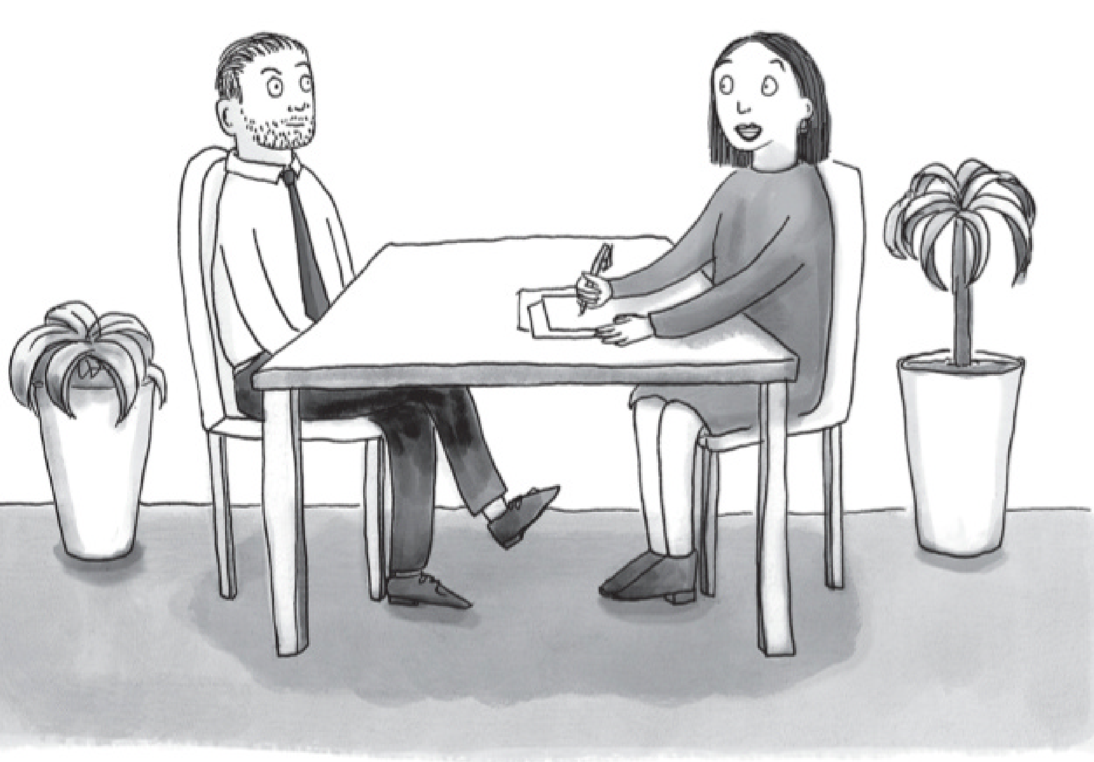
PHOTOGRAPH BY HORST P. HORST

less often in letters-from than in letters-to. Abe Burrows, the great musical "book writer"—what others call a libretto Broadway people call a book, and what others call a book they usually call revenge—contributes several good things. He offers Porter definitive wisdom about making musicals: "Doing a show is not unlike bringing up a child. The child develops a life of its own. The parents do their best but certain things remain immutable, and the child is what he is." Porter, a great appreciator, tells Burrows that he liked those words enough to paste them in his scrapbook.

Yet a reader, without learning much directly about Porter's art, comes away from the book with an even higher opinion of him as an artist than might have been held before. Though he was born into genuine if provincial affluence, with second-tier European royalty filling out the family's dance card on vacation, he chose to become a working stiff. Reversing the usual American ascent from labor to leisure makes for a more strenuous, and more moving, story. The labor produced a new kind of American lyric, and language.

Porter's personal tale was well known even when other songwriters' were not. To get a bio-pic, peers among the great songwriters had to die young, like Gershwin (who got a pretty good movie in "Rhapsody in Blue") or Lorenz Hart (who got a terrible one in "Words and Music"). But Porter was the subject of two movies, including one, "Night and Day" (1946), made in his lifetime and with his reluctant collaboration, despite the unsayable but far from secret truth that he was gay. In his own social world, he was about as out as a man could be in those days, with a rich repertory of lovers and assignations.

Porter's story was appealing because it was seemingly so generational—so Fitzgerald-like in its ascension from Midwestern beginnings to East Coast fame. Born in Peru, Indiana, in 1891 to the wealthiest family in town—perhaps the wealthiest in all of Indiana—he went to Yale right before the Great War. (Fitzgerald, four years behind him, at Princeton, regarded Porter's commercial career a little enviously, as a path not taken.) A precocious though largely untrained musician, Porter wrote what are still among the school's fight songs. Then came a short period of service in the war, followed by a long holiday in Europe through the early twenties, with a loving but mostly sexless marriage of convenience to Linda Lee Thomas, of the Virginia Lees. It was a perfect Gerald Murphy-style Jazz Age life, disrupted only by Porter's determination to get to New York and become a successful Broadway songwriter—a very strange, and very "Jewish," ambition for a young socialite.



"I'm sorry, Derek, but, now that Kelsey has learned how to convert JPEGS *into PDFs, we can't justify keeping you on."*

Beneath his smooth, genial, almost inhumanly productive and evasive surface, there were turbulent waters. His very name, for all its air of Ivy League ease, represents a burdened legacy. The Porters were his difficult, scapegrace father's family; the Coles were his mother's rich and ambitious Indiana family. He was a Porter by birth but, if his mother had anything to do with it, would be a Cole for life.

Privilege has its privileges, and Porter's queerness, evident in the countless letters in this volume to kindred souls, like Monty Woolley—the once famous character actor, whom he'd met at Yale, the original star of "The Man Who Came to Dinner"—seems never to have tormented him, as it did Hart. Porter, by temperament and entitlement, came of age among the openly bisexual European upper crust. Everyone knew that he was a gay man with a marriage of convenience; everyone agreed to maintain the pretense that he wasn't. Far from a drama of either repression or subversion, the situation seems like an oddly happy social concord.

His letters to his lovers are in the same register as those of the Oscar Wilde–Robbie Ross circle in London a few decades earlier: chummy more than erotic, with a transparent language of concealment, a more or less open code of intrigue. "Way out here one gets that wicked city idea about New York & all those purlieus," he writes to the dancer Nelson Barclift, from his cottage in Williamstown. "Have *you* been in a purlieu tonight? Confess. Say, 'Guilty.' But do write me soon that you have reported it all to Ben & Ollie"—gay friends—"for, for some intangible reason, they cleanse the impurity out of what they touch. And they touch *plenty*."

It might be argued, and has been, most notably in William McBrien's 1998 biography, that Porter's sexuality shaped his sentiments, which burst out in happy one-night-stand songs like "Just One of Those Things" and "I've Got You Under My Skin," with their note of sexual infatuation, cherished but not easily transmuted into domesticity. "I'd sacrifice anything come what might/For the sake of having you near/In spite of a warning voice that comes in the night/And repeats, repeats in my ear" does not lead us neatly to become the folks who live on the hill.

But Frank Sinatra had no trouble applying the songs, or their emotions, to Ava Gardner or her successors. At a time when everyone was chafing against the constraints of bourgeois morality, a sex song like "Let's Misbehave" spoke as clearly to straying straights as it did to cruising gays. The sport of writing in a tightly organized genre like popular song is not to smuggle in specifically subversive subtext when the censors aren't looking but to make the subversive emotions universal enough not to need a subtext. Porter was to straight sex in his "affair" songs as his best friend, Irving Berlin, was to Christianity in writing "White Christmas"—the outsider's triumph was to own the insider's material. It may be, as some have suggested, that the climactic lines "But if, baby, I'm the bottom / You're the top" in Porter's "You're the Top" already meant in 1936 what they mean in erotic slang now; the point is that, post-Porter, they no longer had to mean only that.

Porter is so famous for his gifts as a lyricist that it might seem mischievous to the point of perversity to suggest that his real greatness resides in his skills as a composer. Yet how many other popular composers have had more hits with instrumental, unsung versions of their work? Artie Shaw's version of "Begin the Beguine" is the best known, but the Dave Brubeck Quartet's album of Porter songs, from the mid-sixties, with Paul Desmond's peerless sax, is just as good. Though rarely overtly jazz in the Arlen-Gershwin manner, his melodies have so much mysterious inner propulsion that, asked to swing, they practically swing themselves.

For all Porter's aristocratic mien, his tastes were rather plain, as those of the American upper classes usually are—high taste is typically simple taste, as anyone who has eaten at a Wasp club knows. His list of requirements for a hotel room in Philadelphia during a tryout included sliced liverwurst, salami, and bologna, and twenty-four cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Another small but striking social trait that runs through the letters is the preponderance of presents that were incumbent on people in show business then; Porter gives and gets flowers, paintings, wine, books for the smallest of reasons, and then writes at length to thank the present-giver, or to thank the present-recipient for his thanks. People who came of age in Porter's time took gift-giving as seriously as the Kwakiutls took their potlatches, and for the same reason: coming of age in a culture of surplus, they believed in constant exchanges of the signs of prosperity.

Porter, high-Wasp tastes and all, had to navigate a Broadway and Hollywood world that was astoundingly uniform in its Jewishness. A famous story has Porter confiding in a friend that he was going to write "Jewish tunes," meaning minor-key pentatonic croonings of the kind that Berlin had mastered in "Blue Skies." In Mary Martin's first showstopper song, "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," the melisma in the middle section is self-consciously, even uncomfortably, Eastern European-sounding in order to indicate that "Daddy" is Jewish.

The degree of reverse cultural assimilation that this Gentile from the Midwest had to undertake is captured in one of the funniest letters Porter ever wrote, to his (Jewish) agent, Irving Lazar:

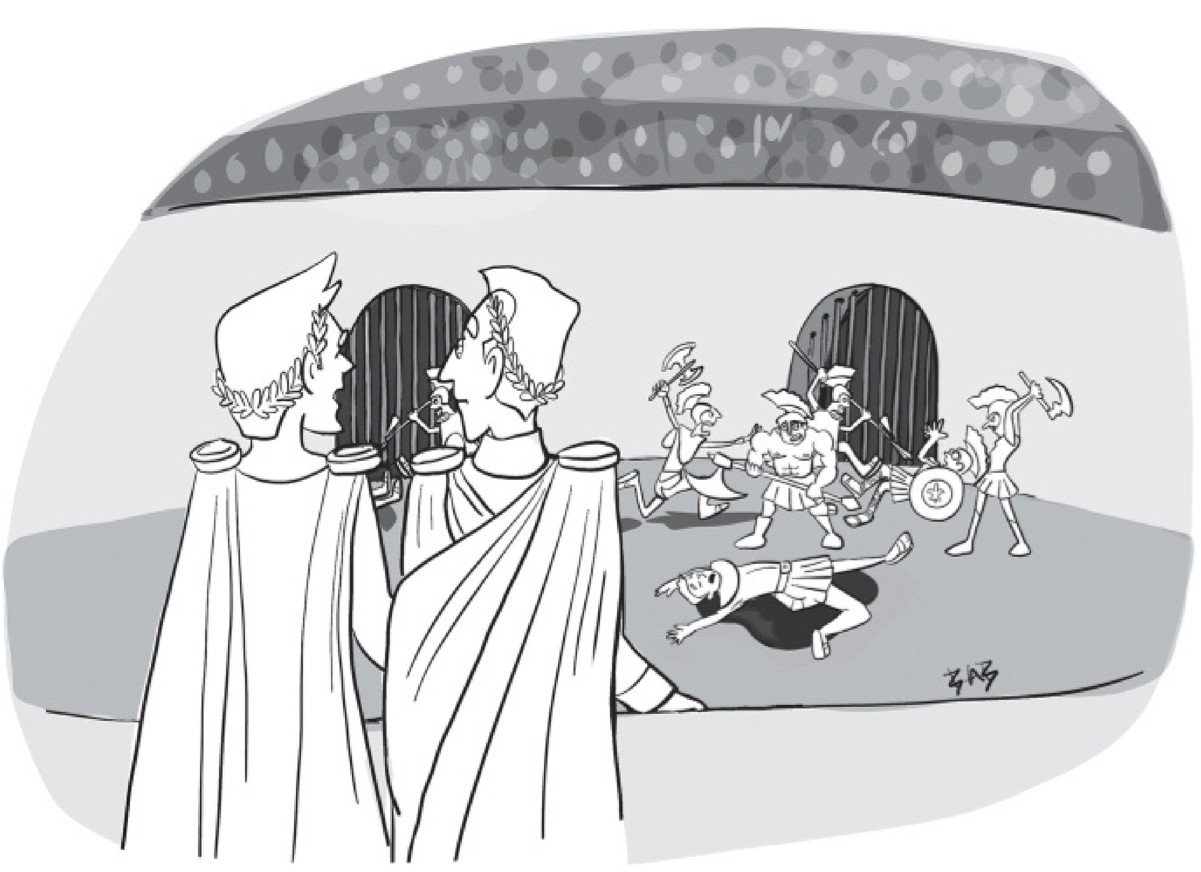
> Thank you for your letter of Dec. 28 1955. I am not an idiot child. I do not call Sol "Saul" nor do I call Saul "Sol." These are two different people. There is a producer named Sol Siegel—and an assistant producer named Saul Chaplin. Sol sent Saul to be with me here for ten days while I wrote new material. . . . Since Saul (not Sol) returned to Culver City, I have received charming telephone calls from Sol, and a most enthusiastic letter from Saul.

It's a Porter lyric in miniature ("Sol Sent Saul to Tell Me All"), and shows what a forest of alien manners, or at least names, a boy from Indiana had to make his way through at a time when all the other great show-tune innovators—Kern, Gershwin, Rodgers, Arlen—were Jewish. What other kind of tunes *could* you write?

Porter's story does have a dramatic climax. In the fall of 1937, when he was forty-six, he endured a horrific accident, in which the horse he was riding fell on him and crushed one of his legs. The injuries led to more than thirty operations in the course of his life, all excruciatingly painful, and a legacy of permanent suffering. Just how agonizing his condition must have been, and what consequences it had for his work, has been a source of much speculation. Wilder, among others, insists that there was minimal good work after the accident. Eisen and McHugh dispute that verdict; certainly, his most successful Broadway shows, including "Kiss Me, Kate," all happened well afterward. Still more certainly, the letters are heroic in their avoidance of self-pity, though they also reveal for the first time just how bad his injuries were. "When the cast was removed, I shall never forget the first sight of my leg," he wrote to Monty Woolley from his hospital bed. "I asked 'What is the jelly it's covered with?' And the reply was, 'That's not jelly, that's blebs'"—blisters. "It was hard to believe for the whole leg looked like a flowing mass of lava and it sorta made me sick." Heavily drugged, he managed to write down some of his "craziest illusions": "My right leg stretches, slanting upwards before me, like the side of the hill, the summit of which is my toes. From the ankle down—and approaching me—any number of small, finely sharply toothed rakes are at work."

The rakes got only more sharply toothed over time. He managed to persevere, it seems, by a mixture of champagne and stiff-upper-lipness. But not a day of it could have been easy for him. There are long, relatively unrevealing diaries from later trips to the Greek islands and Naples and beyond, and the extent of his activity doesn't sound at all like that of a crippled man. On the other hand, one of his companions says that he was "inhuman" on these voyages, a comment that seems to refer to the prodigious gifts of concentration necessary to keep out the pain and focus on the pleasures.

Porter writes engagingly, as an artisan, about the business of putting on a show. It is pretty clear that he measured a show's success simply by the number of hit songs it produced, and



"I know we decided this was immoral, but no one has called me on it in a while, so I think I'll stick it out through the season."

he had savvy theories about how long it takes a song to become a hit once it's out in the world. He writes minimally about his own creative process for the same upper-crust reason that he writes minimally about his suffering—only second-rate people go on and on about their inner lives. Analyzing is the same as complaining, and self-analysis is the twin of self-promotion.

Clues about his creativity shine through the workmanlike surface, though. Porter still wrote in a revue style where the characters were hardly worth dramatizing. The producer Cy Feuer, who put on two late Porter shows, says in his memoir that Porter didn't really care where the songs fit within the story; he was blithely composing numbers for "Can-Can" (1953) while the book writer and the director struggled bitterly with the plotline, and though he threw in new ones as needed, he seems to have stood mostly aside, amused and productive, as the rest of the creative team raged and yelled. In fact, Abe Burrows wrote a couple of deft, diplomatic letters asking Porter to please wait to write the songs until they knew what the story was. Told that the integrity of the show demanded that there must not be any ooh-la-la songs about Paris, Porter airily wrote the most obvious of all such songs, "I Love Paris." It was too irresistible not to include.

He didn't need the shows to write drama. The songs *were* the stories. "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" and "So in Love," though situated in the plot of "Kiss Me, Kate," are hardly situational. He constructed songs so that each one is a drama in itself, with an allusive, erudite verse leading to a simpler storytelling refrain. In perhaps his greatest song, "Just One of Those Things," from 1935—it's a song that Holden Caulfield, who likes nothing, likes—the verse is an offhand sequence of references that were not quite commonplace then: Dorothy Parker, Heloise and Abelard. The chorus becomes slyly dynamic ("Just one of those crazy flings / One of those bells that now and then rings"), building from kiss-off to remembered kissing. The movement is minimal but emotionally exact ("Our love affair / Was too hot not to cool down"), and describes a journey from mere ruefulness to actual regret, a small but significant emotional arc that requires a great singer to convey.

List songs are anathema to the post-Sondheim sensibility, trained as it is on Oscar Hammerstein's heightened dramatic style, but Porter's lists are his poetry. Ring Lardner, in these pages, made fun of the overwrought imagery in Porter's romantic lyrics; where Porter had "Under the hide of me / There's an, oh, such a hungry yearning / Burning inside of me," he offered as an alternative "Night and day, under the rind of me / There's an Oh, such a zeal for spooning, running the mind of me." But Porter is never the least bit off when it comes to Americana. He takes pleasure in rhyme for rhyme's sake, in the play of language, and does so in a way that is, oddly, far more in tune with the main lines of the American avant-garde of his time than operetta style could ever be.

In "You're the Top," the collisions of high and low, the mixed vernacular that expects his audience to be equally comfortable at the movies and in the museums, is the purest kind of E. E. Cummings–Stuart Davis thirties pop avant-garde: "You're the top! / You're the Colosseum. / You're the top! / You're the Louvre Museum. / You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss. / You're a Bendel bonnet, / A Shakespeare sonnet, / You're Mickey Mouse." The beautiful chaos of similes—Cellophane! Botticelli! A Waldorf salad!—captures the hyperkinetic collisions of New York experience as perfectly as Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie." The wit of the build, leading past Rome and Paris and culminating in high Americana, is complemented by a brilliantly quiet bit of rhyming—had "Mickey Mouse" and "Strauss" been rhymed before? When George and Ira Gershwin wrote their own Strauss tribute, a couple of years later, the waltz "By Strauss," Ira had to cheat a little and make all the rhymes German, including rhyming "Strauss" with "Fledermaus"—the difference between "Fledermaus" as a rhyme and "Mickey Mouse" being the difference between talent and genius.

While still a very young man, Porter coined the phrase "See America First" (it was the title of his début musical, a George M. Cohan spoof), and that gift for creating idioms may be a clue to the quiddity of his genius. Porter is one of the three great lyricists of invented American speech, with only Chuck Berry in the fifties and Robert

Hunter of the Grateful Dead in the seventies his equal in this respect. Berry constructed a world of fast cars and fried chicken and teen-age back-seat fumblings, with the right jive to cover it all; Hunter, in songs like "Uncle John's Band" and "Friend of the Devil," invented a lost nineteenth-century world of runaway trains and pursuing sheriffs and brass bands playing by the riverside which somehow resonated as an available American reservoir of myth. (Of course, people had written songs about cars before Chuck did, but he was the one who had the specific wit to put Maybellene's Coup de Ville in a contest with his own V-8 Ford. Just as, where the Band wrote about Dixie in the winter of '65, only Hunter made up Uncle John, who could have been equally at home playing during the Civil War or at Woodstock.)

Hart *heard* a world; Porter made one up—a New York of penthouses and night clubs and hangovers which still resonates as another kind of American myth. Even phrases now as familiar as "I've got you under my skin" and "I get a kick out of you" are not precisely idioms taken directly from American talk, the way that Hart's "I could write a book" and "I've got five dollars" are. No doubt people had long said that a thing got under your skin or that we got a kick out of something else, but no one said exactly those formal sentences; Porter's special work was in elevating the smallest of small talk into comic poetry. It gave him license to invent a vernacular. "Down in the depths of the ninetieth floor," "But in the morning, no!," "I'm always true to you, darling, in my fashion," even "You're the top"—none of these things were idiomatic before Porter transformed them from little acorns into mighty jokes. When, in "Blazing Saddles," the villain quotes "You Do Something to Me" ("Now go do that voodoo that you do so well!"), we know at once that he is quoting Cole Porter.

Porter's condition worsened—in 1958, the crushed leg would have to be amputated—and though his energy didn't slacken, the quality of the work did decline. The letters trace his work on one good movie score ("High Society"), a couple of so-so shows ("Silk Stockings" and "Can-Can"), and a promising but too-late-in-the-day collaboration with S. J. Perelman on an Aladdin musical for television. What's odd is that Porter writes voluminously in the nineteen-fifties without ever mentioning the recordings of his work that would do more than anything to assure his immortality: the Nelson Riddle arrangements of his greatest songs, which Sinatra recorded in the decade beginning in 1953. "I've Got You Under My Skin," "I Get a Kick Out of You," "Just One of Those Things," "Easy to Love," "Anything Goes"—these are the high points of Porter interpretation. (Sinatra's sadly obscure live recording of "Night and Day," with the Red Norvo vibraphone trio in Australia, is perhaps the best of all.)

As Will Friedwald and James Kaplan have both pointed out, the Riddle-Sinatra "I've Got You Under My Skin" was as pivotal a recording in American music as "Like a Rolling Stone" would be a decade later. Before that, Porter is Astaire and elegance; after that, he swings and can become anything more. Although Porter's biographer Robert Kimball recently assured an audience that Porter had admired Sinatra and befriended him—his slightly dubious evidence being that Sinatra took over Porter's apartment in the Waldorf after his death, in 1964—that doesn't show up in the letters, and one wonders if Porter was even fully aware of the Riddle-Sinatra records, beyond the royalties he collected. Yet Porter lives on in such recordings of single songs more than in the spasmodic revival of shows that often need heavy rewriting to exist onstage at all. His dramatic songs are all the dramatic revival we need.

All art aspires to the condition of music, Walter Pater wrote; within music itself, all music dreams of becoming another kind of music. Art songs dream of becoming pop songs and pop songs dream of becoming folk songs, too familiar to need an author. We hear Porter now without knowing that it's Porter we're hearing. Like Stephen Foster, he sublimated his suffering into his songs, until the songs are all we have, thereby achieving every artist's dream, to cease to be a suffering self and become just one of those things we share. ♦

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BOOKS

A TRICK OF THE SENSES

Robert Hass’s inner history of the decade.

BY DAN CHIASSON

In “Summer Snow,” Hass’s poems embed the stories of how they were written.

The American poet Robert Hass’s new book, his first since 2010, is “Summer Snow.” Hass’s work is a fifty-year standoff between concentration and dispersal: part haiku, part road trip. Hass, who served as the U.S. Poet Laureate in the nineties, and for decades has taught English at the University of California, Berkeley, has published his volumes rather slowly, beginning in 1973. When his new poems turn up, they often embed, almost as an alibi, behind-the-scenes footage of how and where they were written, including outtakes and bloopers. They are shapes made in time, over time, like the mellow hikes and meandering conversations that they sometimes describe. “Summer Snow,” with its patient count of tanagers, warblers, aspens, and gentian, its year-after-year audit of the dead, its tallies of everything from our country’s drone strikes to his friends’ strokes, is Hass’s inner history of the decade. It arrives right on time.

“Nature Notes in the Morning,” an early poem in “Summer Snow,” distills Hass’s method: first, some short, almost neutral captions (“East sides of the trees / Are limned with light”), followed by jotted ideas and judgments (“Just distribution theory: / Light”), along with memories and associations (“What do I know from yesterday?”). The effort is precise, not random, like a chef adjusting his seasonings. The word “notes” has a double meaning, and, as often happens in a Hass poem, a tune starts to form out of scattered impressions. To render “the way light looked on plums,” Hass tells us, the eighteenth-century Japanese artist Itō Jakuchū “smuggled Prussian blues from Europe.” The poem starts to conflate its own colors with the names of painters’ dyes (“Last streaks of sunset: alizarin”) and crests with an anecdote about “the old art historian” who told Hass to pick up a brush and paint “small rectangular daubs so that they shimmer”—or else to “shut up about Cézanne.” Accuracy in painting, which may depend on whether your country has an embargo on the source of the perfect blue, seems to chasten Hass’s comparatively too easy art. But the modest sketch that ends the poem depends on the thick weave of adage and anecdote that precedes it:

> Sierra morning.
> Bright sun. No wind,
> So that stirring in the cottonwood
> Must be a warbler.

Here Hass moves from vision to hearing. Poets, after all, work primarily on the ear; they must be trained to recognize a warbler not just by sight but also by sound. Though distinct from the painter’s art, this, too, reflects the lifelong cultivation of skill: the least “natural” thing in nature is a poet peering into the bushes for material.

A Hass poem is a site of instruction, sometimes handed down from Hass’s own masters, like Eugenio Montale, Czesław Miłosz, and Stanley Kunitz. But it’s equally a site of distraction. Hass’s poems about his mentors are full of background, ambience, human overspill; the nugget of inherited wisdom is almost always ironized by circumstance. In “Three Old Men,” Kunitz, having celebrated his hundredth birthday, reports, bluntly, “I don’t recommend it.” Equally terse is the second old man, a Wordsworthian gardener remembered for his runic talk about “the names of plants.” The third aging

ILLUSTRATION BY MARC PALLARÈS

figure in this fable is Hass himself, his mentors all dead:

> Tomorrow I’m
> Going to hike to the waterfall
> And listen to the sound of it.

“We don’t live altogether in either opinions/Or sensations,” Hass writes in “Montale’s Notebooks,” a poem about “what you want / From poetry.” He slaloms from Montale to Cavafy to the emperor Nero, from a New England picnic in the seventies to a recent day when “a friend came to the door” with a proposition: “Why don’t we get stoned and write a poem together?” What’s the word for a “fast succession of scenes” like this? Hass supplies the answer: “For what that is/I think Husserl invented the term *lebenswelt*.” The distinct Hass touch is that rather quaint “I think,” which feels like a courtesy from another time, before people got out their phones and Googled such things. (The term means “life-world,” and it’s one of the foundations of phenomenology.)

The finished poem is exquisitely unfinished, a making-of documentary for a scrapped film. It ends with a list of provisional lines that Hass “could have presented to my friend to remind her/Of how we had loved the very idea of the line”—and now presents to the reader instead. This is the core feature of Hass’s work, in my view: an Etch A Sketch method that allows the surface of the completed poem to be erased and revised, with traces of previous attempts, along with gaps for when the lightning strikes. By my unscientific count, these gestures have only become more plentiful in the course of Hass’s career. He sometimes describes his effects the way a critic might (“And now a trick-of-the-senses dissolve”), or annotates them the way an editor might:

> Lists of colors to ban from future kingdoms:
> (Make list here.)
> (Terre verte, alizarin.)

Still other asides function as performance notes for the reader. In “The Archaeology of Plenty,” the word “wound” is followed by a helpful pronunciation guide—“not ‘eu’ but ‘ow’ ”—which has the effect not of rigging the choice but of reminding us that two options exist. Like that slightly stiff “I think,” these moments are meant to expand and share Hass’s authority, to include the reader in the collaborative vibe often depicted in the poems. But they can also read as control by subtler means, wresting back from the reader the power to make his own mistakes.

When I teach Hass, I always ask my students what they think of these fill-in-the-blanks passages. The response is a mixed bag; people have different histories with performed modesty. I love these moments and have learned from them how to do certain things in my own poems, but I’m also watchful, a little distrustful of that extended open hand.

The experience of reading Hass cannot be isolated from his presentation of himself as a reader. His poems are often plotted as developments within the larger, ongoing process of reading and translating his masters. In “Second Person,” Hass wanders the streets of Paris, ducking into a café to work through a Neruda poem, a “line at a time.” A few poems later, we read the finished product, “Pablo Neruda: Only Death.” Hass is among the most demystified of great writers—in person, apparently, as well as on the page. As a teacher, he’s known to greet strays and interlopers with attentiveness.

In a poem called “What the Modernists Wrote About: An Informal Survey,” he humbles that most formidably serious generation of stylistic innovators by reducing them to CliffsNotes versions. T. S. Eliot is “poor Tom”; Ezra Pound “wrote about a number of subjects, as I recall,” including “Chinese history / And being imprisoned in a cage.” Wallace Stevens, a most abstract and cerebral poet indeed, “wrote about the Connecticut River” and “the way sexual magic dissipated in his life.” At times, Hass’s list is profoundly moving (he’s right about Stevens); at other times, it feels like a kind of irreverent joke, turning these stern eminences from the past into cozy Californian boomers. Hass personalizes everything, warms everything up. He’s an open book; but he’s also someone whom readers should, in every sense of the phrase, keep their eye on. ♦

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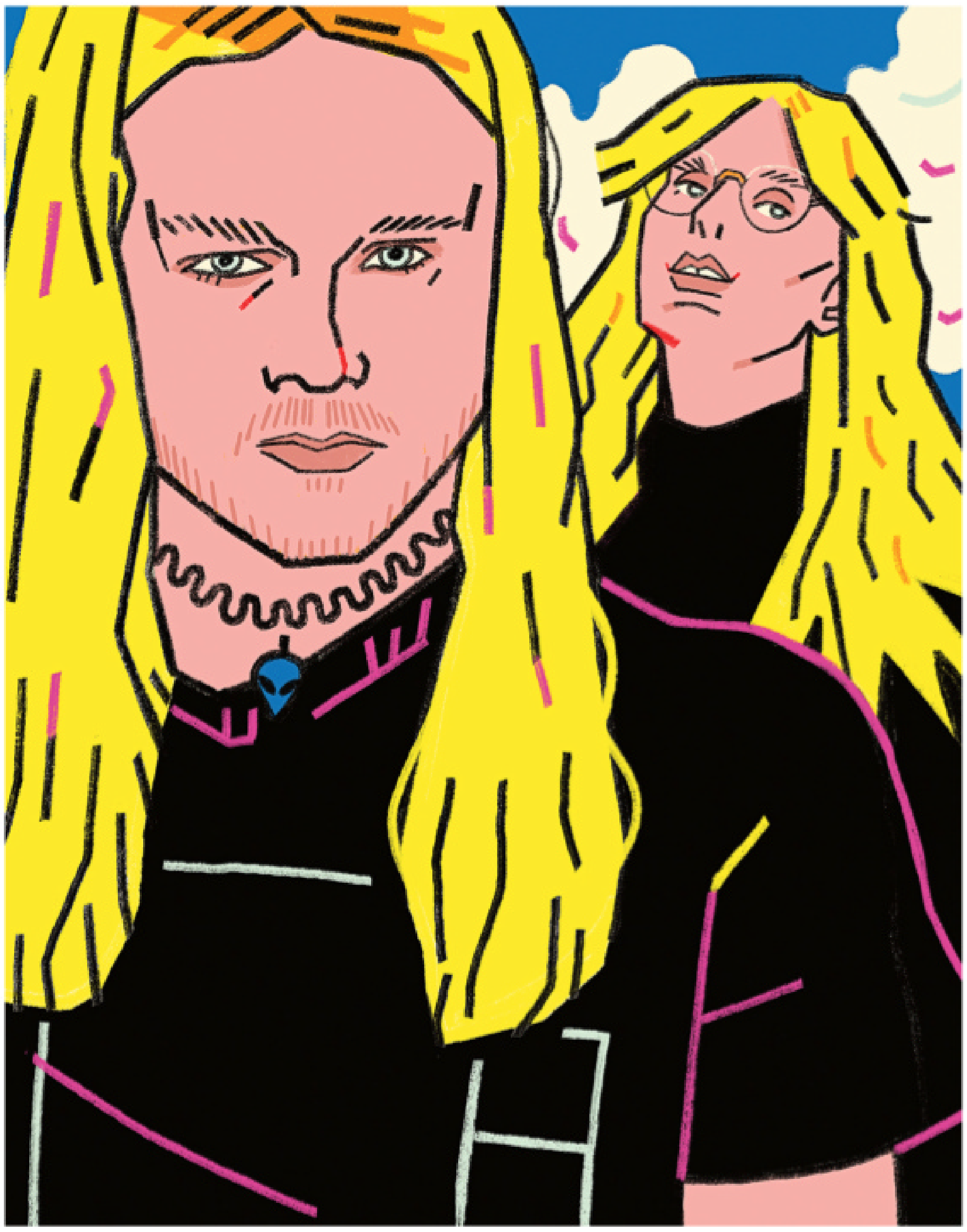
THE NEW YORKER

POP MUSIC

DIGITAL RETOX

The adrenaline-filled electronic songs of 100 gecs.

BY CARRIE BATTAN



The duo offers a jarring antidote to the similarity of much contemporary music.

In the fall of 2018, the members of an online collective called Thwip Gang had a far-fetched idea. Earlier that year, they had hosted a birthday party for a friend on Minecraft, the popular and influential open-world video game. The birthday party drew hundreds of guests online. Now Thwip Gang conceived of a more ambitious social experiment: a music festival called Coalchella, a riff on Coachella, also to be held on Minecraft. They booked dozens of musicians, most of them obscure electronic acts, to perform live virtual sets. More than twenty-seven thousand people streamed music from the eight-hour event, which included two digitally rendered stages, a Ferris wheel, and sponsorships from fake brands.

One of the acts was 100 gecs, an avant-garde electronic duo, composed of Dylan Brady and Laura Les. The pair met as teen-agers in St. Louis, and had cultivated a loose collaboration for several years. At the Minecraft festival, they débuted a song called "ringtone," a fitting anthem for a high-concept and low-stakes event taking place inside a video game. Their voices were pitched up to Chipmunk levels, and they sang the chorus, a meditation on smartphones, over a sickly sweet, oversimplified synth melody: "My boy's got his own ringtone / It's the only one I know / It's the only one I know." Months later, they performed at another Minecraft music festival, this time with a heftier set of songs, the crown jewel of which was "money machine"—a squelching electro-rock track with cartoonishly distorted bass and a nonsensical preamble in which Les calls someone a "piss baby." It was the right kind of music to be incubated in virtual reality: silly, uncanny, full of adrenaline, and blithe about mainstream trends.

These songs are the foundational tracks of 100 gecs' first album, "1000 gecs," which was released last summer. It's a whirlwind record, clocking in at only twenty-three minutes, but it contains a multiverse of references, as well as a deconstruction of those references. To listen to the album is to have as much fun as one can possibly have while receiving an auditory flogging. In the musical scrap yard of "1000 gecs," anything is fair game, especially modes and styles from history's refuse pile. The album displays a fondness for unfashionable genres—electroclash, pop-punk, emo rap, dubstep, trance, industrial rock and dance, drum 'n' bass, death metal, chiptune, and even polka—but a hardened allegiance to none. (The use of commonplace hip-hop vocabulary is the only through line to the current pop landscape.)

100 gecs is not the first group to make hyper-referential, free-form electronic music, of course. Brady and Les are disciples of John Zorn, the prolific experimental composer, who has made chamber music, improvisational jazz, and hardcore punk, sometimes all on the same album. And they exist in the lineage of acts like the Avalanches and Girl Talk, sample-based electronic artists who created connect-the-dots listening experiences using familiar songs. But "1000 gecs" is less a product of nostalgia than of nihilism, an impressively concise maximalist exercise with no rules. It does not capture specific eras so much as it celebrates a history of musical idiosyncrasies, calling to mind the songs of pop music's strangest one-hit wonders—think Eiffel 65's "Blue," Aqua's "Barbie Girl," and Skrillex's "Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites." Unlike so many of its

ILLUSTRATION BY KELSEY WROTEN

predecessors, 100 gecs does not use samples. What sound like glitches are fleeting glimpses of the past.

As solo artists, Brady and Les have followed more direct impulses, creating wistful, experimental pop and hip-hop. Together, they scramble these impulses into oblivion. It would be tempting to write off 100 gecs as a prank or a fluke if the songs did not have such an eerily resonant emotional core. Brady and Les's heavily filtered voices express genuine anxiety about love, money, and technology. On "ringtone," they convey the overwhelming feeling of looking at your phone: "Forty-five group texts, fifty group D.M.s, send another text askin' me if I've seen them." This turns to panic on "800db cloud," a song that alternates between spare, longing whispers and mosh-pit mayhem, including a brief hardcore-style breakdown in which their voices are pitched down to guttural growls. "I might go and throw my phone into the lake, yeah," they sing. In the video for the song, the pair are shown manically headbanging in front of the TCL Chinese Theatre, on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, as passersby film them with their phones.

Part of what makes 100 gecs' work so exhilarating is that it fulfills conceptual promises made more than a decade ago, when the Internet was beginning to reshape notions of what music could be. Theoretically, people now had access to software and music libraries that would allow them to make whatever style of music they pleased. Artists, it was believed, would surely take more liberties, and pop music would become stranger, bolder, and more whimsical. That isn't quite what ended up happening. Instead, the dominance of streaming services created a marketplace that rewarded conformity—it's easier to keep people listening to a playlist when everything on it sounds pretty much the same. That's why even music classified as "independent" or "genre-defiant" has come to sound like easy listening. 100 gecs is a jarring antidote to this trend.

Brady and Les haven't toured much beyond their virtual-reality festival appearances, but live performance has become an important aspect of the 100 gecs mythology nonetheless. (In a pleasing turn of events, they were recently booked to perform at this year's real Coachella.) In late November, they played a string of opening sets for the hip-hop act Brockhampton, capped off with a headlining show at the intimate Brooklyn venue Elsewhere. The event quickly sold out, and tickets were listed on StubHub for more than three hundred dollars. The space was not equipped to handle the crowd's enthusiasm, and at times the show resembled a gleeful stampede.

Both Brady and Les have mangled nests of platinum-blond hair, and Brady likes to wear a floppy scarecrow hat as he bounces behind his minimal setup of a laptop and synthesizers. About halfway through their brief, chaotic set at Elsewhere, the pair informed the crowd that they wouldn't be able to play "money machine," a fan favorite and their biggest song. "We sold the licensing," one of them announced. "And now we're not allowed to play it anymore."

This, of course, was a joke. But it was also a bit of winking commentary on their ascendance. 100 gecs has attracted the kind of buzz that is typically accompanied by offers from major labels, eager for a piece of the novelty. It has also generated the sort of painstaking discourse that is increasingly uncommon in music, given the speed at which new artists pass in and out of view. (The band even has naysayers, eager to deflate its hype bubble. "You've probably never heard anything like them—unless you've heard Sleigh Bells, or Salem, or Die Antwoord, or PC Music, or any other artist from the past decade who emerged from the same jacuzzi-hot gene pool that once produced Frank Zappa, Primus, Andrew W.K. and Crazy Frog," a critic from the Washington *Post* wrote.)

The funniest part of the comment was the notion of someone "licensing" a song like "money machine," which, despite being 100 gecs' most straightforward pop song, is still a disorienting blizzard of noise. The idea of its clattering sound accompanying TV shows, commercials, and retail installations invoked an alternate, more interesting reality, in which 100 gecs' sensibilities were tastemaking rather than subversive.

To the crowd's immense joy, Brady and Les then launched into "money machine." They played a few more songs, and soon they'd run through their entire catalogue. As the audience chanted "gec! gec! gec!," it became clear that Brady and Les would have to come up with an encore. They played "money machine" for a second time, as if to savor their fleeting ownership over it. ♦

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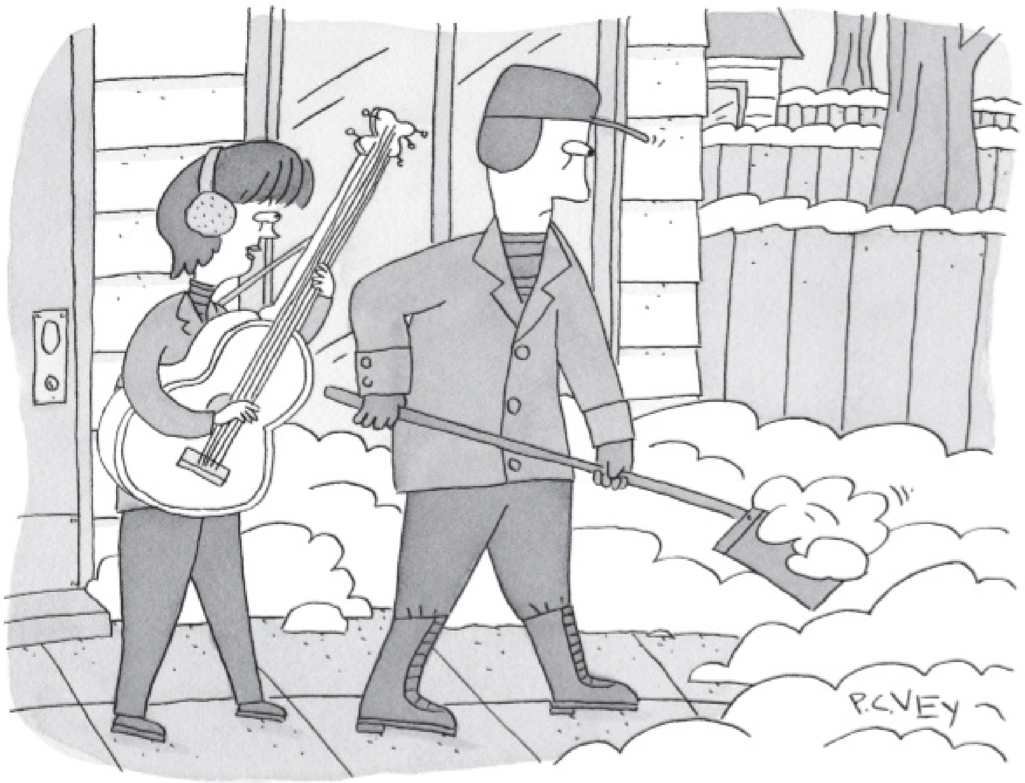
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, January 19th. The finalists in the January 6th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 3rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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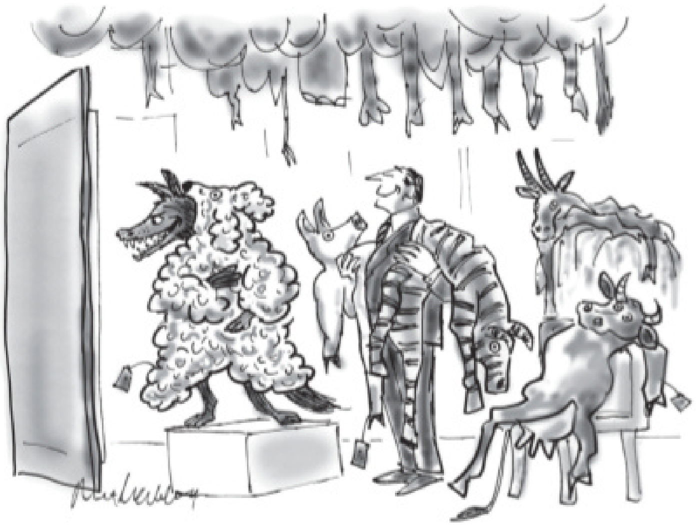
THE FINALISTS

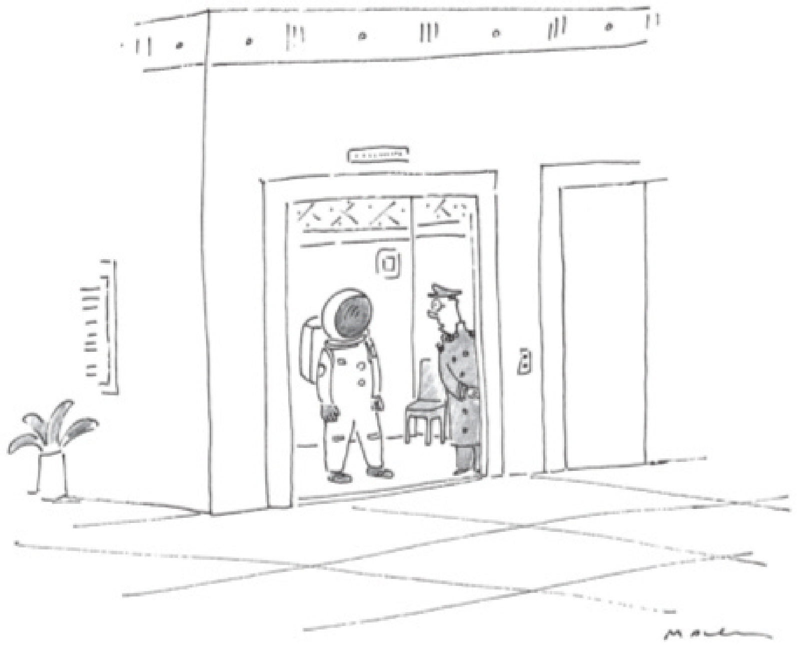


“I'll take this and the granny dress.”
Maria A. Sullivan, Winchester, Mass.

“This is more practical for work, but the zebra is just so fun.”
David Weiss, State College, Pa.

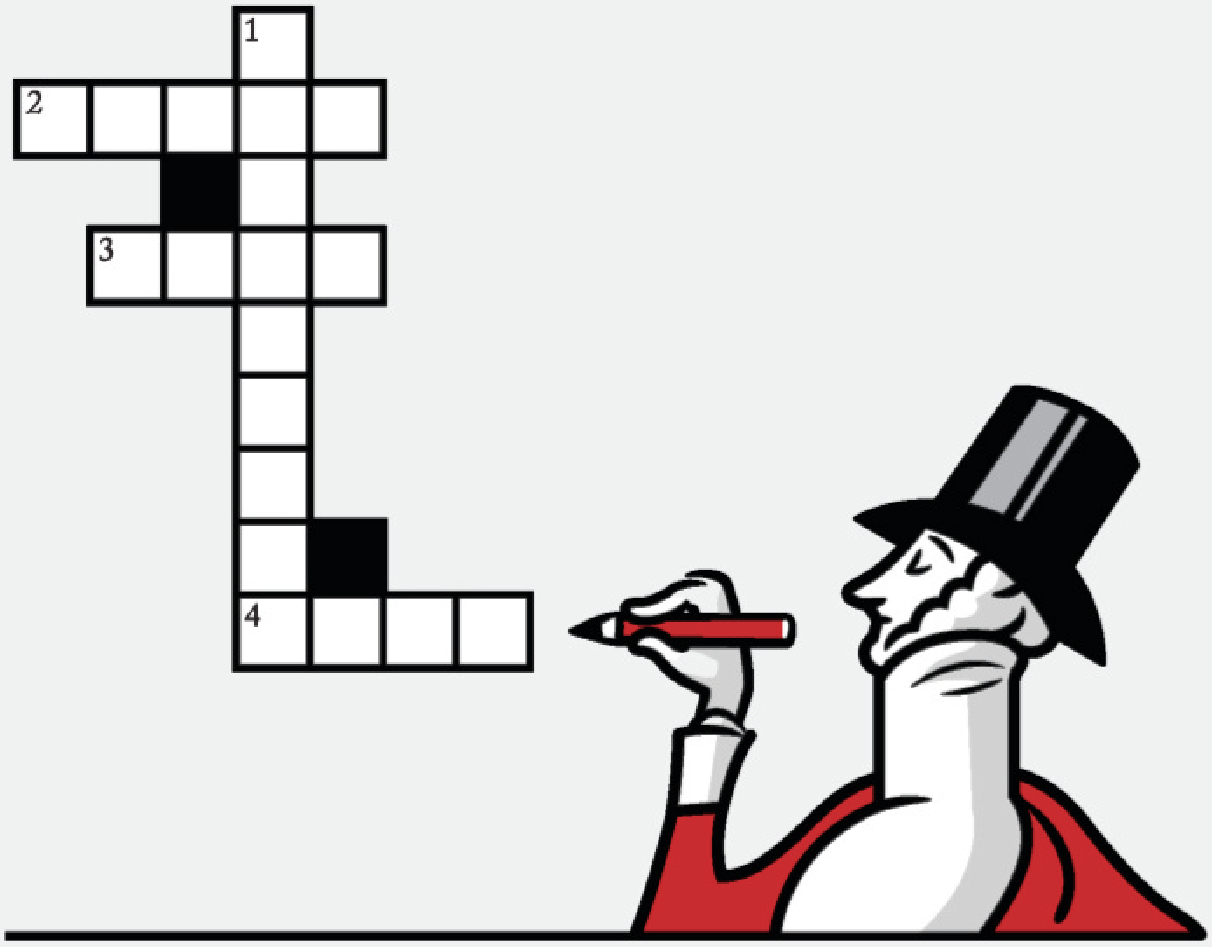
“Perfect! I'm surprising someone for dinner.”
Joe Guarisco, Arden, N.C.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Please watch your small step.”
Joel Nelson, Goleta, Calif.

The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



1. Plot device sometimes used in thrillers.
2. Bad stuff to microwave.
3. N.Y.C. club said to have catalyzed the punk movement.
4. Apt to snoop.

Find a new crossword every Monday and Friday,
and a cryptic every Sunday, at newyorker.com/crossword

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